

The friend justifies the means:
How modern friendship is effected, and affected,
by the use of online social networks

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration and Statements

Declaration

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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Thesis summary

This thesis explores UK Internet users' experiences of creating and maintaining friendships on social networking sites and online communities, with a particular focus on how online friendships compare to and affect participants' face-to-face social networks.

There is a large body of literature regarding online friendship and the use of online social networks. However, significantly less research has been published which focuses on UK-based users or on 'online-to-offline' friendships: relationships which begin online and move offline, becoming incorporated into participants' everyday social circles. This study contributes to the literature in these under-researched areas.

The study used a mixed-methods research design: an online questionnaire provided data which facilitated the purposeful selection of participants for face-to-face interviews. Although both quantitative and qualitative methods were used for data collection and analysis, the emphasis of the research is qualitative. Much of the current research into online interaction and friendship has been limited by the use of quantitative methods (Amichai-Hamburger, Kingsbury & Schneider, 2013). The qualitative focus of this research resulted in rich and deep data about participants' experiences of online friendship.

The results show that a significant majority of participants had made new friends on the Internet, and that online communities such as LiveJournal are more likely to foster new friendships than social networking sites such as Facebook. It was clear that online friendships are evaluated and measured in the same way as 'traditional' friendships. The migration of online friends into offline, everyday social circles was widely reported, suggesting that it is a frequent occurrence among the wider user population. Additionally, the migration of offline friends into online social networks was described by a number of participants, illustrating the use of online social networks to maintain and sustain offline, everyday friendships.

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* I was tempted to say that you're the wind beneath my wings... but, honestly, I can't even *type* that with a straight face...

Dedication

In memory of my father,
Barry Robert Jones (1939-2010).
You taught me that nothing is beyond my reach,
that every day is a school day,
and how to drink like a Morris dancer.
Cheers, Daddy!

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Abbreviations

BBS	Bulletin board system
CAQDAS	Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software
CMC	Computer-mediated communication
DW	Dreamwidth
FB	Facebook
FOAF	Friend of a friend
IM	Instant Messenger / messaging / message
IRC	Internet Relay Chat
IRL	In Real Life
ISP	Internet Service Provider
LJ	LiveJournal
MMO	Massively multiplayer online (game)
MMORPG	Massively multiplayer online role-playing game
MOO	MUD, object oriented
MUD	Multi-user dungeon / dimension / domain
ONS	Office for National Statistics
OPAC	Online Public Access Catalogue
OSN	Online social network
OxIS	Oxford Internet Survey
PASW	Predictive Analytics SoftWare
RL	Real Life
SNS	Social network(ing) site / service / software
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
WLR	Weight Loss Resources (www.weightlossresources.co.uk)

Chapter One

Introduction to the Research

This research explores the relationship between a recent and ubiquitous technology – the Internet – and an ancient and essential connection between individuals – friendship. Where once communities were geographically limited and social networks were predominantly made up of family members and local, long-held friends, the advent of the Internet and the World Wide Web has meant that increasing numbers of people are creating personal communities online, without restrictions of distance or established acquaintance.

Online communities and social networks are a function of computer-mediated communication (CMC), which began in the early days of the Internet, enabling individuals to connect online with strangers using, for example, bulletin board systems, email groups, and instant messaging systems. CMC can be asynchronous, such as emails and blog posts, or synchronous, such as chat rooms and instant messaging applications. Online communities are usually created around a shared interest, while social networking sites are more often focused on creating connections between individuals. Within subject-based communities, off-topic discussion often occurs, which can lead to the exchange of knowledge and experience, as well as the sharing of both important and insignificant personal information. This can then result in the development of strong online friendships which in some cases move offline, and may subsequently be integrated into participants' everyday lives.

As online social networks become more widely used, there has been increasing interest from academics and researchers in the interactions which occur within them, particularly in the most popular sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Google+. Some sites are focused on facilitating the public articulation of pre-existing networks of friends (see Section 2.5.3); however, common-interest communities such as blog communities or email lists connect people who otherwise would never have met in person or via CMC. These are the types of online communities which enable individuals to make and maintain genuine, strong friendships, and it is these friendships which this research seeks to explore.

1.1 Rationale for the Study

While academic research into online communities and social networks has shown that there can be positive consequences of participation and interaction on the Internet (Best & Krueger, 2006; Ellison, Lampe & Steinfield, 2009; McKenna, Green & Gleason, 2002; Norris, 2004; Steinfield, Ellison, Lampe & Vitak, 2012; Westcott & Owen, 2013; Whitty & Joinson, 2008), much of the reporting in the mainstream media about what has been termed ‘social media’ (an umbrella term used to describe Internet-based communities and networks in which individuals view, create and exchange content, and interact) is noticeably less positive.

Recent headlines in the UK on the subject of social media have included: warnings regarding NekNominate, an online drinking game which was linked to a number of deaths in early 2014 (“Councils want social networks”, 2014); reports on addiction to social media and the way that they provide validation, particularly on sites such as Facebook and Twitter (Kean, 2014; Sayers, 2014); suggestions that social networking reduces capacity for analytical reasoning (“Is social networking”, 2014); and discussions of online bullying, or trolling, on social media sites (Gander, 2014; Williams, 2014). Although positive stories are also reported in newspapers and on radio and television, it often seems that more attention is paid by wider society (those who are not academics or researchers in the field) to negative experiences or results of online interaction.

As the use of the Internet becomes more and more ubiquitous in the UK and other developed countries, debate continues as to whether it damages individuals’ ability to socialise with others. A popular criticism of online social networks, whether in the press or in the professional literature, is that they do not foster true relationships between members, and that they detract from, and reduce commitment to, real life interactions and community.

According to the Office for National Statistics, 44.3 million adults in the UK (87% of the population) use the Internet (ONS, 2014), and of these more than half (53%) are users of social networking sites (ONS, 2013). The Oxford Internet Survey 2013 (Dutton, Blank & Groselj, 2013) reports the figure as slightly higher, at 61%. According to ComScore, the most popular social networking site in the UK is Facebook, with more than 34.2 million unique visitors in November 2013; it was also the fourth most visited online “property”, behind Google, Amazon, and Microsoft sites (ComScore, 2014). While none of these

figures exactly match up, it is clear that social networking is a popular online activity in the UK, and that Facebook in particular is very widely-used. There has been significantly less research undertaken into social networking websites, and the friendships which develop on them, within UK-based user populations than in other countries: much of the existing research was conducted in North America and Australasia and, increasingly, in Asia.

Additionally, a great deal of the published academic literature is based upon a relatively young population. A significant percentage of primary research has been conducted within university student populations (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007; McLaughlin, Vitak & Crouse, 2011), perhaps for reasons of convenience or accessibility, or in order to achieve a large sample. There has also been increasing interest in research into the use of the Internet by those aged 55 and over, for example those who have retired from work, and those who are part of the 'baby boomer' generation, born between 1946 and 1965, who grew up in an age when computers were unthought-of or, at least, unavailable (Sum, Mathews, Pourghasem & Hughes, 2008). This research, while not specifically targeting any age group, also did not specifically exclude any. All age ranges from 18 upwards were included in the sample groups, although the 18-24 age range and the 65 and over age range were the two groups which were least well represented in the research.

The concept of social capital is one which has been researched in depth and from a variety of viewpoints (see Section 2.6). As an idea which is based on the value which individuals can gain from their connections with others, and participation in communities and social groups, social capital has been closely linked to membership of online communities and social networking sites (Best & Krueger, 2006; Vitak, Ellison & Steinfield, 2011). There are considerable similarities between measures of social capital and of friendship, and this study, in exploring participants' experiences of online friendship, seeks also to discover how these two concepts connect and whether dyadic friendship can contribute to individuals' levels of social capital.

1.1.1 Early inspiration

This thesis was originally inspired by earlier undergraduate dissertation research, in which the impact of online community membership on offline social capital was explored. A number of the participants in that research reported the development of extremely close friendships as a result of their involvement in these common-interest

groups. They told of shared confidences and the exchange of support and affection online, and of regular meetings, holidays taken together and, in one case, relocating in order to be closer to each other.

These online-to-offline friendships, where one half of an online dyad is incorporated into the other's offline social circles, were not well represented in the literature, but the benefits and positive experiences reported by the participants were inspiring.

Six years later, there is still relatively little empirical research about these migratory platonic relationships, although romantic relationships which move from online to offline are well studied. However, the subjects of interaction on the Internet and the friendships and connections which are made online remain popular within the literature.

1.2 Research Aims and Objectives

The aim of this research is to explore UK-based Internet users' experiences of creating and maintaining friendships on social networking sites and online communities, with a particular focus on how online friendships compare to and affect participants' face-to-face social networks.

The central research question is thus:

To what extent does regular online interaction affect participants' offline, everyday social networks?

In order to answer the central research question, several objectives were established. Each of these represents a valid area of enquiry in itself, and together they contribute to answering the central research question. These objectives are as follows:

1. To discover whether participants in online social networks perceive fellow members to be their friends.
2. To explore whether the type of online social network determines the level of friendship found with other members.
3. To discover whether participants in online social networks evaluate the friendships developed online differently to those they developed offline.

4. To explore whether, and why, online friendships are integrated into users' offline, everyday lives.

1.3 Methods Used

Following a review of the literature, a mixed methods research design was selected for this research, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The design — the sequential explanatory design (participant selection model) — has two phases: the first, quantitative phase in which data collection is undertaken and the resultant data is analysed in order to allow purposeful sampling of respondents; the second, qualitative phase consists of qualitative data collection, using the purposefully selected sample, and analysis. The final interpretation and synthesis stage involves both quantitative and qualitative results, although the emphasis of the research is on the qualitative phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 74).

The first phase of this study entailed a web-based questionnaire, distributed using convenience and snowball sampling in a variety of locations online. 433 completed responses were received and initial analysis was undertaken in order to identify potential participants for the second phase of the research. Subsequently, the quantitative data was analysed at greater depth in order to provide more detailed comparative results.

The second phase of this research consisted of face-to-face interviews with 36 participants who were resident in England and Wales. These interviews were digitally recorded, fully transcribed, and analysed using iterative thematic coding, providing deep and rich information on participants' experiences.

The methods used are discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three.

1.4 Scope of the Study

This research concerns the ways in which participation in online communities and social networking sites can benefit individuals, specifically with regard to the development of online friendships. It seeks to explore individuals' experiences of creating and maintaining

friendships online, and the ways in which those friendships affect participants' everyday life.

The intention was to conduct this study using a UK-based sample, in order to contribute to the smaller body of literature on this topic which has been produced in this country. However, the primary phase of data collection, by online questionnaire, resulted in an international sample, with respondents from 25 countries, although the majority were people resident in the UK. The second phase of data collection, face-to-face interviews, was entirely UK-based.

This research explores the experiences of UK members of online communities and social networking sites; while both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used to collect and analyse data, it is a predominantly qualitative study, focusing on participants' opinions and perceptions of online friendship.

1.4.1 Types of relationship

Online friendship is experienced in a variety of ways and at different depths, as is 'traditional', face-to-face friendship. "People develop strong feelings for each other in cyberspace, and forge relationships, from casual acquaintance to close friendships, and intimate partnerships sometimes leading to marriage" (Baker, 2008, p. 163). The literature discussed throughout this thesis covers a range of levels of personal relationship, from fellow community members to best friends, and sometimes also romantic relationships.

Romantic relationships fall outside the scope of this research; only platonic friendships are explored, whether same-sex or cross-sex in nature.

Many of the participants in this research mentioned experience of group friendships and, while these are discussed in the results chapters, the primary focus is on dyads; friendships created between two individuals. Except where explicitly specified otherwise, the relationships discussed within this study are dyadic friendships.

1.4.2 Facebook

Ten years ago, on 4 February 2004, Facebook was launched at Harvard University. Originally called ‘Thefacebook’, and limited to Harvard students, it quickly grew to include other universities in North America, then internationally: in September 2006 membership was opened up to anyone aged over 13 who had a valid email address (“Timeline”, 2014). Facebook is now the top ranking social networking site in the world, according to the Alexa website ranking system (<http://www.alexa.com>). As at the end of 2013 it had 1.23 billion active monthly users and in December 2013, on average, there were 757 million daily active users (“Key Facts”, 2014). Facebook states that its mission

is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected. People use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what’s going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them. (“Key Facts”, 2014)

It is, therefore, difficult to ignore Facebook in any discussion about online interaction. Much of the published research into online friendships focuses on Facebook, and uses students as the sample group. While this study includes a high proportion of Facebook users, in both the quantitative and qualitative phases, the site is not the focus of this research.

1.4.3 ‘Virtual’ versus ‘real life’

The use of the term ‘real life’ can be problematic: many active Internet users are uncomfortable with drawing a distinction between the reality or legitimacy of online actions or interactions and those which are experienced offline, in person. Particularly for individuals who have had important and valuable experiences in an online environment, there can be a sense that those experiences are belittled or demeaned by the implication that they are less ‘real’ than those that take place face-to-face.

As a result, rather than using ‘real life friend’ to describe someone who had originally been met in a ‘traditional’, face-to-face way, it was decided to use terms such as offline, everyday, face-to-face, and in-person throughout this thesis. Nonetheless, there are some instances of the use of ‘real’ or ‘real life’, since it is a useful shortcut term and can be used to describe not only family and friend relationships which are predominantly conducted in person, but any other activities or events, from

employment to hobbies. Within the context of this work, it is merely used as a device to distinguish relationships or activities which do not take place online and does not imply any difference in validity between ‘online’ and ‘offline’.

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis consists of eight chapters. This chapter has outlined the background to the study, its scope, and the research question, aim and objectives. Chapter Two reviews relevant academic literature on the subjects of online social interaction, online communities and social networking sites, social capital, and friendship both offline and online. Chapter Three describes the methodological approach taken in the research and the methods used for data collection and analysis.

Chapter Four discusses significant or particularly interesting themes which arose from the quantitative and qualitative phases of the research, and relates them to the literature. Chapter Five presents the results of the quantitative questionnaire; Chapters Six and Seven discuss the data obtained from the face-to-face interviews, relating the themes identified to the four research objectives given in Section 1.2 above. Chapter Eight presents a discussion of how the study has fulfilled its original aim and objectives, identifies some limitations to the research, and provides conclusions and recommendations for future research.

Chapter Two

A Review of the Literature

This chapter presents a critical review of the literature which is available on the use of online communities and social networking sites, the impact of the Internet on social capital, and online friendship. Each of these subjects is studied within several academic disciplines including information studies, computer science and psychology.

A significant amount of scholarly literature has been produced over the past decade on the subject of socialising online and on how the Internet has affected ‘real life’ community and individual friendship. However, UK-based Internet users are relatively under-studied in this area, and this thesis will go some way to fill that gap.

2.1 About the Literature

A search strategy is essential in order to perform an efficient and fruitful literature search. It is easy to lose focus or become distracted when conducting a literature review, and a systematic plan can help to reduce the likelihood of wasting time or resources.

2.1.1 The search strategy

A number of keywords and phrases were identified and used, both alone and in combination, to locate and select literature from a variety of sources. These included, but were not limited to: online social network, social network site, SNS, social capital, online friendship, online community, and online to offline.

In many search engines or information retrieval systems, an asterisk (*) can be used as a wildcard character in order to substitute for one or more unspecified characters. For example, online communit* could lead to results for both online community and online communities. Other search methods include the use of Boolean operators, enclosing a phrase in quote marks so that it is searched for in its entirety and the use of ‘+’ or ‘-’ symbols to ensure that words are included or excluded from a search.

As well as keyword searching, ‘pearl growing’ and ‘chaining’ were used to identify further literature. Pearl growing is a method of using a single relevant item to find further items, for example by using the same keywords or subject descriptors within the same database or by searching for items which cite the original work. Chaining uses the bibliography and references listed by a relevant item to locate other relevant sources.

2.1.2 Types of literature

Due to the speed with which change occurs on the Internet, it often seems that by the time research is published, particularly within a book or monograph, it is out of date. Despite this, there are several seminal studies which are over a decade old which are still frequently cited and used as a foundation for current research.

The following types of literature were consulted for this review: books, monographs, journals, conference papers, online articles, theses, bibliographies and websites.

2.1.3 Sources of literature

A variety of sources were used to locate the literature, including: Aberystwyth University’s OPAC (Primo) and e-Journals resource; the National Library of Wales; LISTA (Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts); JSTOR; Web of Science; and Google Scholar.

Table of Contents alerts were set up for relevant journals in order to receive details of the contents of new issues. These included the Journal of Librarianship and Information Science, American Behavioral Scientist, the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication and Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking.

danah boyd’s Bibliography of Research on Social Network Sites (2013), which is regularly updated, was also used to locate literature on social networking and online community research.

2.1.4 Limitations

Research into the Internet and the activities and behaviour of its users has become gradually more frequent over the past three decades, and the advent of what has come

to be known as Web 2.0 only increased the popularity of the subject area. As noted above, there are seminal works which still have relevance today, but generally speaking research conducted prior to the year 2004 relates to an online culture which is radically different to the social networking sites with which most users are familiar today.

2.1.4.1 Chronological scope

As a result of the rapid changes which have taken place within the field in the last decade, the literature search predominantly focused on works published since the year 2000, and particularly on those published since 2005. Older studies were evaluated and reviewed where they were considered still to have relevance.

2.1.4.2 Geographical scope

No specific geographical limitations were set on the literature search, although only works in English were consulted. The majority of research into online interaction has been done in the United States and, increasingly, in Australasia and Asia.

2.2 Online Social Interaction

The Internet's potential for facilitating social interaction via computer-mediated communication was recognised in the earliest days of networked computers. As technology advanced and as access to the Internet became more widely available, more online social networks and communities were developed and their popularity increased. In 2013, more than half of adult Internet users in the UK were active on social networking sites and/or online communities (Dutton et al., 2013, p. 39; ONS, 2013 p. 7).

For the purposes of this thesis, 'online social network' (OSN) is used as an umbrella term for the various sites and services which enable individuals to meet and interact through the mediation of the World Wide Web.

2.2.1 A brief history of online social interaction

The practice of social interaction with the use of computers began in the very early days of the interlinked networks which we now know as the Internet. The first public bulletin board system (BBS) was developed in 1978¹: these simple, text-based systems enabled users to exchange asynchronous messages. The next evolution of Internet-based communication was Usenet, a world-wide discussion platform. This was followed by IRC (Internet Relay Chat), chat rooms, electronic mailing lists, and website forums and discussion boards.

With the advent of Web 2.0² came the potential for more complex online interaction; users could both produce and consume content. Sites like Flickr, MySpace and YouTube allow users to share photos, music and videos; blogging platforms such as Blogger and LiveJournal enable individuals to present their creative writing or personal thoughts in a public forum; social networking sites like Facebook let users connect with old and new friends and to post updates on what they are doing; and micro-blogging platforms such as Twitter are used to post short statements about individuals' activities or thoughts.

2.3 The Internet and Computer-Mediated Communication

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) and the reasons why individuals participate in it are popular topics of research and discussion, both within academia and the wider journalism media.

In the early days of the World Wide Web, Michael Strangelove wrote about how human behaviour was changing as the new millennium approached.

1 The first BBS was the Computerized Bulletin Board System (CBBS), developed by Ward Christensen and Randy Suess to connect a community of computer enthusiasts. It first went live on 16 February, 1978 (Gilbertson, 2010).

2 'Web 2.0' is the term used to describe the current generation of Web technologies. It is difficult to provide a conclusive definition, since the technology is constantly evolving, but it is generally accepted to include, for example, users as creators and providers as well as consumers of content, and social aspects such as tagging and indexing, as well as personal interaction.

The Internet is not about technology, it is not about information, it is about communication--people talking with each other.... The Internet is mass participation in fully bi-directional, uncensored mass communication. Communication is the basis, the foundation, the radical ground and root upon which all community stands, grows, and thrives. The Internet is a community of chronic communicators. (Strangelove, 1994, n.p.)

The development of an online “community of chronic communicators” may have been a by-product of Tim Berners-Lee’s dream of a “common information space” (Berners-Lee, 1998), but even now, more than two decades since Berners-Lee first invented the World Wide Web, debate rages about the safety, the validity and the *point* of socialising online.

With research being undertaken into CMC within a variety of academic disciplines, the focus of the research is dependent upon the background of the scholar. Authors represented in this chapter include computer scientists, information scientists, social psychologists, management scholars and educationalists. There is no guarantee, however, that approaching the subject from a similar academic background will produce similar results: as Watt, Lea and Spears note, “Social psychology has generally presented two opposing conclusions about the effects of text-based CMC – positive and negative respectively – both of which assume that CMC is less social than face-to-face interaction” (2002, p. 63).

Joinson (2003) makes the observation that any new technology, from writing to the telephone to the Internet, is considered at first to be less valid than what went before: “technology is, at least initially, seen as an artificial substitute for something more ‘real’” (p. 18). He cites Sara Kiesler (1997), who distinguished between two different results of technology – amplification and transformation. She noted that amplifying technology enables users to do what had been done before, but more quickly, cheaply and/or accurately; transformative technology changes the ways in which people think, work, act or respond (Kiesler, cited by Joinson, 2003, p. 19).

2.3.1 Negative aspects of CMC

The limitations of interacting in a computer-mediated forum, for example the lack of visual cues (such as body language and facial expressions) or verbal and aural cues (such as tone of voice), led many researchers to believe that online communication can never be as valid and as valuable as face-to-face communication. “Kiesler (1984), Stoll (1996), and others have found CMC to be an inadequate way for people to share

emotional content, let alone develop meaningful, long-lasting relationships, due to the lack of nonverbal “cues” (Chenault, 1998, n.p.).

Although Clifford Stoll acknowledged that a network of individuals linked by computers “is, indeed a community” (1996, p. 43) and that support and advice or information can be found online, he also felt that online communication was without depth, and that it lacked “friendly relations”.

The suggestion that the limitations of text-based CMC, in terms of visual and aural cues or clues, mean that significant emotional relationships cannot be created online is one which is repeated often in the literature. “The reduced social presence of the internet may limit its ability to support emotional, nuanced, and complex interactions” (Boase & Wellman, 2004, p. 2).

Whitty and Joinson (2008) report that early research “led to a widely-accepted notion that CMC was suitable for task-oriented communication, but unsuitable for building socio-emotional ties.... This assumption is still widely held” (p. 21). They discuss the importance of communication in building trust between individuals:

Handy (1995) stated that ‘trust needs touch’ (p.46). This reflects the widely held belief that trust between people is poorly established in lean, mediated environments (e.g. Bos *et al.*, 2002). [Considering the possibilities for deception on the Internet], it is perhaps not surprising that many commentators have seen the Internet as a difficult place to build trust. (Whitty & Joinson, 2008, p. 99)

Whitty and Joinson’s book aims to provide a balanced look at how the Internet, and the anonymity provided by it, affects people’s adherence to the truth. What the authors term the “truth-lies paradox” is examined, with a particular focus on trust.

2.3.2 Positive aspects of CMC

Brittney Chenault’s 1998 essay was written with the aim of reviewing some of the scholarship relating to the sharing of emotions and development of personal relationships within CMC. She believed that “Emotion is present in computer-mediated communication (CMC). People meet via CMC every day, exchange information, debate, argue, woo, commiserate, and support” (n.p.).

McKenna et al. (2002) believe that the Internet is “a prime venue for social interaction” and that “in the midst of all this social activity, people are forming relationships with those whom they meet on the Internet—especially those with whom they interact on a regular basis” (p. 9). They argue that there are many similarities between online interactions and those which take place in traditional venues, but that there are some specific aspects of online contact which can actually increase communication and familiarity. Examples given are the anonymity afforded by the Internet; other aspects of online communication which enable individuals to move quickly past the “gates” and barriers which can impede the growth of friendship; and the ease of finding communities based around specific interests, thereby bringing together people who have something in common (pp. 9-10).

Several authors have written about the advantages which might be found in a text-based medium. Factors which could reduce an individual’s willingness to communicate and reveal aspects of themselves to others (self-disclose) in other situations can be negated by online interactions. Issues to do with appearance, physical or verbal disabilities such as stuttering, shyness or anxiety can be neutralised by text-based communication. These are hurdles which could take a long time to overcome, or which may never be overcome, in face-to-face interactions, but which are invisible and therefore surmountable online. “The Internet may ... be helpful for those who have difficulty forging relationships in face-to-face situations because of shyness, social anxiety, or a lack of social skills” (McKenna et al., 2002, p. 30).

Norris (2004, p. 33) also believed that the text-based communication offered by the Internet can overcome marginalisation; anonymity can bridge the gender, race or wealth gaps that are hard to overcome in person. Norris used Pew data³ from the 2001 survey, ‘Communities and the Internet’. She concludes that the respondents believed that the Internet both widens their community experience (by enabling contact with people from different backgrounds and with different beliefs) and deepens it (by strengthening their existing networks). This echoes Kiesler’s 1997 theory of amplification and transformation: existing social groups are amplified into wider and

3 The Pew Research Center is a non-partisan American think tank which provides information on the issues and trends shaping America and the world. This work is undertaken by seven different projects, one of which is the Pew Internet and American Life Project.

deeper networks, while an increased range of contacts within a community or social network transforms individuals' experience.

Watt et al. (2002) agree that the Internet can increase the number and variety of people with whom an individual communicates: "In addition to helping to maintain existing relationships, the internet also vastly increases the individual's field of eligible social contacts" (p. 61). They also note that the increased use of CMC at work and at home "is augmenting or replacing many of the interpersonal and group interactions normally conducted face to face".

Lee Rainie, who is the Director of the Pew Internet and American Life Project, also agrees that CMC can increase an individual's social circle, though he further states that it can also improve geographically local interactions. "Although Americans use online tools to connect to distant people and groups that share their interests, they also use those same tools to become more connected locally with the organizations and people in the places where they live" (2004, p. xii).

Best and Krueger investigated individuals' online interactions with people with whom they had no offline ties. They stated that the fact that "many individuals do interact socially with individuals met on the Internet is uncontested" (2006, p. 396).

2.3.3 The importance of context

There is unlikely ever to be a single definitive answer as to whether computer-mediated communication is a positive or a negative aspect of the Internet. As Rainie notes,

ties that bind can be helpful as well as harmful. For example, the same technology that helps those who suffer from rare cancers find each other and form life-enhancing support groups can just as easily be used by pedophiles to encourage each other and construct sophisticated rationales for their behavior. (2004, p. xiii)

He writes about the importance of context in the way that people use the Internet and the way that they feel about it. There can be an element of 'us and them' in individuals' opinions of the Internet and its influence – the idea that 'others' are tempted by the 'dark side' of technology, while 'I' or 'we' only use it for beneficial,

educational or improving purposes. No-one wants their own access to be curtailed, but they want controls over those who are harming themselves or others (p. xiii).

Beaudoin's 2008 study explored the link between Internet use and social capital, with a focus on the development of trust. (Social capital in the context of the Internet is discussed in more detail in Section 2.6.) He noted that studies have shown that particular types of Internet use have different results, for example that using the Internet for information exchange was associated with the development of interpersonal trust, while social recreational use of the Internet was not (p. 555).

Whitty and Joinson (2008) aim to provide a balance between the view of the Internet as an *unsafe* space, home to deviant behaviour, and the view of the Internet as a *safe* space which encourages honesty and freedom to express our "true selves", in which close relationships can develop. They note that the differences in behaviour which occur online, and which can result in increased self-disclosure, can affect the results of research conducted via the Internet. The perceived anonymity and 'safety' of an online survey or interview can lead to more detailed revelations than would be achieved in a face-to-face encounter (p. 11).

It is important that researchers are aware [of] the potential interaction between how people behave online, the design of their study and the eventual results. There is remarkably little research that considers the impact of medium on the research process – despite many years of, say, CMC research being particularly informative for online interviewing. (Whitty & Joinson, 2008, p. 53)

2.4 Online Community

The terms 'online community' (or 'virtual community') and 'social networking site' are often used interchangeably; however, the literature illustrates that the two can be quite different. Though a social networking site may beget an online community, not all online communities are born of social networking sites. Social networking sites tend to be individual-focused, whereas online communities are group-focused and often based around a common interest.

Nancy Baym undertook an ethnographic study in the early 1990s into a Usenet newsgroup dedicated to US soap operas (rec.arts.tv.soaps). She observed the inter-group relationships, members' perceptions of the group's sense of community, and the established norms. She

considered it to be “an online community, as an audience community, and as a community of practice” (2000, p. 197).

2.4.1 What is community?

Baym notes that the term ‘community’ is often open to debate within academic literature. She quotes Fernbak, who believed that community is a term which is “infinitely complex and amorphous in academic discourse” (Baym, 2000, p. 39). Marshall states that “*Community* is not so much a thing but a term with political and social import that carries ideals of legitimacy” (2008, p. 208).

The subject of communities which are created online is a frequently-discussed topic among scholars, and has been the subject of much criticism.

Whether or not ‘real’ or meaningful communities form in cyberspace is itself a topic worthy of a whole book ... The notion of ‘virtual communities’ has variously been criticised as a mirage, as pseudo-communities that give the impression of community, but not the reality. (Joinson, 2003, p. 143)

The idea of a group of people brought together by a common interest and thereby excluding those who do not share that interest has also been a concern. “Some new media technologies such as the internet have been criticized for encouraging small groups with narrow specialized interests to form and flourish” (Howard, 2004, p. 5).

The term *gemeinschaft* was used by Driskell and Lyon (2002) in their article exploring whether online community could equate to offline community. (*Gemeinschaft* is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as a “social relationship between individuals based on affection, kinship, or membership of a community, as within a family or group of friends” (2014).) They suggest that online community can, in some circumstances, complement local or traditional community, but that it is a “poor replacement” for geographically-based communities, brought about by geographical proximity and, for example, family groups (“close, emotional, holistic ties” (p. 373)). Norris (2004) also uses the term *gemeinschaft* (p. 31) when she discusses the face-to-face community which has been reported as declining in American society (see Section 2.6). While she stops short of stating that *gemeinschaft*, or something like it, could be created online, she suggests that, at its best, online community could overcome some of the “social divisions” (p. 39) which are experienced offline.

Baym states that investigating online communities “requires understanding them ... as communities of practice organized, like all communities, through habitualized ways of acting” (2000, p. 4). She believed that the fact that scholars were continuing to debate the value and importance of online community contradicted the “ongoing presupposition that there are two types of communities, one authentic and the other virtual” (p. 199).

Marshall states that there are fundamental ambiguities in the relationships formed in online communities, affecting the perceptions of one’s own presence and that of others. He uses the word *asence* to describe the state of suspension between presence and absence. Marshall studied the Cybermind mailing list for over a decade, and notes that the sense of community on the list was increased by the posting of off-topic emails: “expressing the personal was identified with constituting the communal – as the personal is more real by convention” (2008, p. 209). He believes that such an increased sense of community could in fact lead to *asence* as people are driven away by the off-topic discussions, as the personal discussions move off-list, or as people leave the list after arguments or break-ups.

2.4.2 Impact on offline community

Howard Rheingold was one of the earliest, and perhaps most frequently referenced, adherents of online community. His book *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, about his own experiences online, and particularly in the WELL (Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link) online community, is a seminal work in the field. His view of online group interaction is overwhelmingly positive:

In a virtual community we can go directly to the place where our favorite subjects are being discussed, then get acquainted with people who share our passions or who use words in a way we find attractive.... Your chances of making friends are magnified by orders of magnitude over the old methods of finding a peer group. (Rheingold, 2000, pp. 11-12)

Baym described this view as “near utopian potential” (2000, p. 205). She was not alone in this view; responses to the first edition of Rheingold’s work in 1993 were mixed, with a number of authors describing his views as utopian (Fisher & Wright, 2006; Robins, 1995; Wellman, 1997). Alternatively, there are the “dystopian warnings” (Baym, 2000, p. 206) that ‘real’ or geographical community will be lost as a result of grouping ourselves by interest rather than by locality: Mitch Parsell terms

interest-focused communities “narrowly focussed (or narrowcast) communities” (2008, p. 41). Rheingold himself stated that online communities are “not utopias. People need to understand their limitations as well as their benefits. There are dark sides, just as every technology cast cultural shadows” (Newsweek, 1993).

Norris (2004) writes of the ease with which participants can leave their online groups, without the difficulties and emotional costs that occur when leaving a face-to-face group. She writes about the bonding role of online communities; bringing together people with the same narrow interests in a forum where they do not encounter opinions that are contrary to their own.

As noted above, an early concern regarding the widening use of online communities was that it would lead to a reduction in participation in local community, and to a reduction in social cohesion altogether, as users spent more time online at the expense of their relationships with families and friends (Kraut et al., 1998; Nie & Hillygus, 2002). However, as the World Wide Web evolved and social networking sites developed, the literature increasingly demonstrated that this was not the case (Chen, Boase & Wellman, 2002; Katz & Aspden, 1997; Wellman, Quan-Haase, Witte & Hampton, 2001).

2.5 Social Networking Sites

Throughout this thesis the term ‘social networking site’ is used to describe the individual-centred services which facilitate connections between people. However, there are several other terms which are used for the same types of website, including ‘social network site’, ‘social network service’ and ‘social networking service’, all of which are abbreviated to SNS. Another term which is used in the literature is social networking website (SNW).

2.5.1 Perspectives on SNS

danah boyd and Nicole Ellison’s article ‘Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship’ (2008) provides a definition of “social network site” and also gives a perspective on SNS development and a brief review of some of the recent scholarship on SNSs. boyd and Ellison use the term ‘social network site’ rather than the (perhaps more common) term ‘social networking site’. Their reasoning is that the term

‘networking’ is inaccurate in both emphasis and scope: “While networking is possible on these sites, it is not the primary practice on many of them, nor is it what differentiates them from other forms of computer-mediated communication” (2008, p. 211). They state that SNSs are unique in that they enable users to express, demonstrate and visualise their own social networks.

However, boyd and Ellison’s definition is contested by David Beer, who wrote a response to their earlier article in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*. Beer predicted that boyd and Ellison’s piece was “likely to become a highly referenced article that could well shape these emerging debates [about how we study and understand SNS] [and] for this reason their article requires some attention before the dust settles on the path forward” (2008, p. 517).

Beer argues that boyd and Ellison’s reasoning for using the term ‘social network site’ is flawed. Beer believes that classification is necessary in order to “work toward a more descriptive analysis” (p. 518) and that their use of that term ignores the many applications where networking is the primary reason for participation. Beer believes that the different types of site should be separated out. “‘social network sites’ as used by boyd and Ellison, stands for something quite broad. Whereas the term ‘social networking sites’ describes something particular, a set of applications where, to a certain extent, networking is the main preoccupation” (2008, p. 518).

He argues that social networking sites can thus be distinguished from “related but different” sites such as YouTube, where the primary purpose is not the forming of friendships (p. 518). (He notes that YouTube could be categorised as a folksonomy⁴.)

The difficulty that boyd and Ellison’s use of the term social network sites creates is that it becomes too broad, it stands for too many things, it is intended to do too much of the analytical work, and therefore makes a differentiated typology of these various user-generated web applications more problematic. (Beer, 2008, p. 519)

Beer prefers the idea of more, differentiated classifications of these sites, rather than a broad term encompassing all of the varieties of SNS. He compares the use of ‘SNS’

4 A folksonomy is a system of collaborative classification (also known as social tagging, social classification and collaborative tagging), in which content is tagged by a number of users with descriptive terms.

(with or without ‘-ing’) to the use of the term ‘Web 2.0’ – an umbrella term under which many categories may exist.

There are merits to both of these arguments, particularly considering the expansion in SNSs which has occurred since the articles were written. SNSs have many functions: as virtual representations of offline social networks; as online environments in which strangers make connections, either professional or personal, and form entirely new networks; and as a mixture of the two. For example, Facebook tends to be used more for the maintenance of existing, offline ties than for creating new connections with strangers (Ellison et al., 2007; Young, 2011), while LinkedIn aims to enable its users to create and manage their professional networks (LinkedIn, 2013); Twitter often seems to fall somewhere in the middle.

2.5.2 Descriptions of SNS

Where online communities are usually constructed around a common interest, social networking sites are less formally structured. “The rise of SNSs indicates a shift in the organization of online communities. While websites dedicated to communities of interest still exist and prosper, SNSs are primarily organized around people, not interests” (boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 219).

Rau, Gao and Ding (2008) stated that SNSs are different to online communities because they are “designed specifically to help people build online presences and building social networks” (p. 2758). Ellison et al. (2009) agree that SNS use supports the development of social connections, due to the user-centric design of the sites. “What truly distinguishes SNSs from earlier technologies is the articulated social network, which is at the heart of these systems” (p. 6).

boyd and Ellison describe social network sites as

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (2008, p. 211)

The functions listed above are intrinsic to social networking sites, together with the ability to leave public comments and send private messages to other users of the site,

dependent on their personal settings. Other technological features, and the cultures and communities which arise within the sites, can vary significantly.

2.5.3 Making connections

Since the primary purpose of social networking sites is to facilitate the creation and navigation of connections between individual users, the question has arisen within the literature of whether the majority of connections made in SNSs are between those who already know each other offline, or whether they are new connections, made between strangers.

boyd and Ellison believe that the majority of the connections made on SNSs are between those who already have offline connections, and who are part of an extant 'real life' extended social network.

What makes social network sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks. This can result in connections between individuals that would not otherwise be made, but that is often not the goal, and these meetings are frequently between "latent ties" (Haythornthwaite, 2005) who share some offline connection. (2008, p. 211)

While they acknowledge that some sites "help strangers connect based on shared interests, political views, or activities" (p. 210), boyd and Ellison state that "the available research suggests that most SNSs primarily support pre-existing social relations.... This is one of the chief dimensions that differentiate SNSs from earlier forms of public CMC such as newsgroups" (2008, p. 221).

This view is shared by many of the authors of recent studies into the relationships which are formed on social networking sites. Whitty and Joinson (2008) suggest that blogs, or weblogs – "personal online journals or diaries" – are frequently read by people who are already known to the creator: "Often the people who read a journal are ... known to the person rather than strangers" (p. 13). Ploderer, Howard and Thomas (2008) also state that "many social network sites are used to keep in contact with people with whom someone already shares some form of offline connection" (p. 333).

Ploderer et al.'s study of a social network for bodybuilders was an extension of "previous work, which looked at socially-organized social network sites and emphasized the importance of preexisting offline connections with friends" (p. 341).

They found that, in the absence of such pre-existing connections, the members of interest-based sites used those interests to forge connections with others and to link their online and offline lives (p. 341).

Ellison et al. (2009) also found that the use of social networking sites increased connections between individuals who were not necessarily acquainted in everyday life.

At an interpersonal level, the identity information included in public profiles serves to lower the barriers to social interaction and thus enable connections between individuals that might not otherwise take place. On a community level, the organizing features of these sites lower the transaction costs for finding and connecting with others who may share one interest or concern but differ on other dimensions. (2009, p. 6)

Additionally, Ellison et al. note that the increased self-disclosure which occurs on social networking sites could lead to negative results such as targeted marketing, stalking, bullying or even identity theft (2009, p. 9). Furthermore, there may be a lack of diversity within the sites used: people tend to socialise with those who have common interests, backgrounds or opinions.

This is reflected in Mike Thelwall's 2009 study, in which he sets out to discover whether online communication alters the accepted tendency for friendships to develop between people who are similar (homophily), as is often seen offline. He found that, although gender homophily seems to have vanished, other traditional sources of homophily are still common, such as ethnicity, age, religion and sexual orientation (2009a, p. 229).

2.5.4 Being 'real' online

The development of mutual knowledge and understanding, the disclosure and acceptance of personal information, and the gradual building of trust and intimacy between individuals: all of these are steps towards the development of friendship, and whether or not these can occur online has been debated since the earliest days of online communication.

Many researchers believe that people disclose more personal information online than in face-to-face situations. Self-disclosure is an important element in building trust in

dyadic relationships (i.e. those between two individuals) and in groups, leading to shared knowledge and cathartic unburdening of secrets, and also as a means of authentication and identification. The risks associated with self-disclosure are reduced online; individuals may not wait until a dyadic boundary of mutual trust in the other not to reveal shared information has been established before disclosing intimate information. This can increase the likelihood of a “continuing, close relationship” (McKenna et al., 2002, p. 10).

Whitty and Joinson suggest that one reason for this increased self-disclosure is the anonymity afforded by computer-mediated communication:

Anonymity online has a number of separate effects – it leads to a reduction in the number of cues available during interaction (sometimes called ‘visual anonymity’), and it can also lead to a reduction in vulnerability due to lack of identifiability. (2008, p. 14)

Rhiannon Bury investigated women’s online friendships, using participants from her previous research into fan communities. She uses the terms ‘remotely embodied friend’ (REF) and ‘real life friend’ (RLF) but notes “the perviousness of the boundary that fails to divide these categories decisively”: REFs do not involve only computer-mediated communication, and RLFs do not only communicate face-to-face (2008, p. 178).

There may be elements of an individual’s life, or interests which they have, which they do not feel able to share with those in their everyday, ‘real’ life but which they can share or investigate online. Bury’s respondent ‘Cynthia’ shared different interests and aspects of her life with remotely embodied friends than with real life friends. Having met remotely embodied friends through similar interests which were not shared by her real life friends, she was, in a way, “closeted” in her everyday life, and not able to be herself all the time (Bury, 2008, p. 193).

The ability to show one’s ‘real’ or ‘true’ self online has been the subject of a number of studies. McKenna et al. concluded that those individuals who are more able to exhibit their “real self” online are more likely to form close relationships online which endure over time. “Those who are socially anxious and lonely are somewhat more likely to feel that they can better express their real selves with others on the Internet

than they can with those they know off-line” (2002, p. 28). In addition, when individuals develop online relationships using their “real selves”, those relationships are perceived as more important, because they are based on the aspects of themselves that they most like.

A result of increased self-disclosure and exposure of the ‘real self’ online can be higher levels of trust between individuals. Best and Krueger (2006) investigated the relationship between online interactions and social capital, using measures such as generalised trust (p. 395). Their results suggested that “the Internet generally brings together trusting people” (p. 407).

However, despite the potential for self-disclosure and trust development online, some participants in online relationships remain sceptical until or unless the relationship moves offline. Miller and Slater write about a woman who married a man whom she met online; despite several months of online communication and, presumably, the sharing of information and experiences, “she did not and would not characterize it as friendship, let alone as developing on to love, until they had actually met in person. It was not ‘real’, and there was too much possibility for deception” (2000, p. 68).

The tendency of people to meet online in groups or communities based around common interests means that there is a greater tendency towards homophily (Bane, Cornish, Erspamer & Kampman, 2010; McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001; Thelwall, 2009a, 2009b). Uslaner suggested that this reduces generalised trust, because “Trust develops between people of divergent backgrounds” (2004, p. 227); however, his article did not discuss any of the contemporaneous online social networks, although it did mention eBay (“the most widely visited *interactive* site” (p. 227)), and was reliant on data gathered in 1998 and 2000 by the Pew Research Center. Conversely, Best and Krueger found that online community does produce “generalized trust, reciprocity, and integrity” (2006, p. 408).

2.6 Social Capital and Online Social Networks

Much of the research into whether online social interaction results in high levels of trust, mutual self-disclosure and support relates to the development of social capital (Beaudoin,

2008; Best & Krueger, 2006; Jung, Gray, Lampe & Ellison, 2013; Sabatini & Sarracino, 2013; Sum et al., 2008; Vitak et al., 2011; Wellman et al., 2001). As a theory which directly relates to the concept of community, it is not surprising that social capital and its relationship to online communities and social networking sites has become a popular area of research in a variety of disciplines.

2.6.1 Definitions of social capital

The first use of the term ‘social capital’ quoted in the Oxford English Dictionary is from 1835, in the Western Messenger magazine. In the context of social science, John Dewey, an educational reformer, used it in 1900 when writing about the importance of education, although he did not provide a definition. The first useful and defined example of its use is by L.J. Hanifan, also an educational reformer. Hanifan believed that what he called “community social life” was in decline, and in 1916 he wrote about the importance of building social capital, including a definition:

The individual is helpless socially, if left to himself.... If he comes into contact with his neighbor, and they with other neighbors, there will be an accumulation of social capital, which may ... bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community. The community as a whole will benefit by the cooperation of all its parts, while the individual will find in his associations the advantages of the help, the sympathy, and the fellowship of his neighbors. (Hanifan, 1916, cited by Gauntlett, 2011a, p. 129)

Although Hanifan’s idea was mostly ignored until the 1980s, his description is very similar to that used within the social sciences today.

Pierre Bourdieu thought of social capital as a community resource, where all of the assets are available to the group or community. He defined social capital as “the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 14, cited by Steinfield, Ellison & Lampe, 2008, p. 435). He saw social capital as a resource in social and class struggles, for example by the use of social connections in order to advance one’s own interests. He believed that the ruling classes used their social capital to preserve their position and to keep the lower classes in their place. Gauntlett suggests that Bourdieu’s view could be seen as “the ‘dark side’ of social capital” (2011b, p. 2).

One of the most well-known social capital researchers is Robert Putnam, described by David Gauntlett as the “popular, public face of ‘social capital’ theory” (2011b, p. 6). Putnam, like Hanifan, writes about a decline in local community; he believes that a reduction in social capital in the USA in the late 20th century is linked to that decline, and that this is evidenced by a lack of political participation and involvement in local organisations and groups. Putnam’s definition of social capital states that it “refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” and that it is “closely related to what some have called “civic virtue.”” (2000, p. 19); his view of social capital is generally focused on community, rather than the individual. He describes private social capital as benefiting oneself – getting a job, sympathy, companionship – while public social capital benefits others, perhaps by reciprocity. The thesis of his book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000, based on a 1995 article), was that we as a society now do more activities alone, where once we did them with others, and as a result our sense of community and levels of civic engagement are suffering.

The Office for National Statistics in the UK collects data regularly to provide a picture of the societal impacts of social capital and general social attitudes. Their definition is based on that of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD): “networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups” (Foxton & Jones, 2011, p. 1).

Nan Lin’s work on social capital focuses more on the individual, although he acknowledges that individual social capital has an effect on community, and is itself affected by community. He defines social capital as “*investment in social relations with expected returns*” (1999, p. 30). Essentially, he states, “Individuals engage in interactions and networking in order to produce profits”; these profits are benefits of various kinds, such as support, trust and reciprocity. van der Gaag’s definition of individual social capital is similar, although couched in slightly less business-like terms: “The collection of resources owned by the members of an individual’s personal social network, which may become available to the individual as a result of the history of these relationships” (2005, p. 20).

2.6.1.1 Categorising social capital

In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam divided social capital into two types: bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital is formed between “individuals in tightly-knit, emotionally close relationships, such as family and close friends” (Steinfeld et al., 2008, p. 436); it tends to be inward-looking and to entail direct reciprocity (exchanged favours or actions), “and is linked to emotional and social support as well as substantive tangible support like financial loans” (Steinfeld et al., 2012, p. 4). Putnam gives the example that “If you get sick, the people who bring you chicken soup are likely to represent your bonding social capital” (Putnam, Feldstein & Cohen, 2004, p. 2).

Bridging social capital is “associated with weaker ties and access to novel or non-redundant information, such as job leads” (Vitak et al., p. 1). It is formed between socially heterogeneous groups and tends to be outward-looking, resulting in generalised reciprocity (actions undertaken with no expectation of a return of assistance or action). Since most connections within bridging social capital are “weak ties” (see Section 2.7.2), created between casual friends or acquaintances, it can provide access to a wide range of information, but not usually the emotional support provided by the strong ties evident in bonding social capital (Steinfeld et al., 2008, p. 436).

Both bonding and bridging social capital are necessary for a healthy society or community. A community with the bonding, but no bridging, function would lead to isolation and tension between homogeneous groups: “a society that has only bonding social capital will look like Belfast or Bosnia segregated into mutually hostile camps” (Putnam et al., 2004, pp. 2-3).

Barry Wellman, who writes about offline and online social networks, has taken Putnam’s concept of social capital and split it in a different way, into “network capital”, “participatory capital” and “community commitment”. With Kenneth Frank, he describes network capital as “the form of “social capital” that makes resources available through interpersonal ties”; members of “*personal community networks* ... provide emotional aid, material aid, information, companionship, and a sense of belonging” (Wellman & Frank, 2001, p. 1). This

theory focuses more on individual social capital, since network capital can be obtained from any person or group within an individual's social networks, rather than from a "single, solidary group" (p. 1).

The theory of participatory capital focuses on the "civic virtue" element of Putnam's argument in *Bowling Alone* – involvement in political and voluntary organisations and groups: this "affords opportunities for people to bond, create joint accomplishments, and aggregate and articulate their demands and desires" (Wellman et al., 2001, p. 437). The concept of participatory capital also links closely to these authors' concept of community commitment, which is about not only "going through the motions of interpersonal interaction and organizational involvement" (p. 437), but of really having a sense of belonging and involvement in a community, and thus contributing to, and benefiting from, the social capital of that community.

2.6.2 Measuring social capital

As a concept based around the value received or perceived by members of a social network, social capital can be difficult to quantify. However, there are a number of measures which are used by researchers to attempt to evaluate levels of social capital. The most frequently mentioned are trust, reciprocity and norms of behaviour: "As used by social scientists, social capital refers to social networks, norms of reciprocity, mutual assistance, and trustworthiness" (Putnam et al., 2004, p. 2). Although they can be measured separately, these items are related.

Trust may be personalised – involving people who are personally known – or generalised – applicable to the wider community and to organisations. Personalised trust is linked to bonding social capital, between strong ties: one example of a survey item used to evaluate personalised trust is: "There are several people online/offline I trust to help solve my problems" (Williams, 2006, p. 602). Generalised trust relates to the weaker ties of bridging social capital: an example question is: "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?" (British Social Attitudes Survey, 2000, cited by ONS, 2002, p. 79).

Reciprocity can also be categorised in two ways; as specific, or direct, reciprocity and as generalised reciprocity. These are, like levels of trust, connected to the type of social capital. Specific reciprocity usually occurs between strong ties, within bonding social capital; an action is undertaken on the assumption of an immediate or eventual reciprocal action. Generalised reciprocity refers to an action with no expected return, “as in the case of holding the door open for a stranger who is carrying a heavy load” (Williams, 2006, p. 600). Evaluating the level of reciprocity in a social network is often tied closely to the evaluation of trust. An example question from the Citizen Audit Questionnaire, 2001, is: “Do you think that most people you come into contact with would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance or would they try to be fair?” (cited by ONS, 2002, p. 84). As Vitak et al. note, “Norms of reciprocity are important for social capital because individuals who anticipate benefiting from others’ actions or who have done so in the past are more likely to help others” (2011, p. 2).

Social norms are the informal rules which govern our behaviour and lead to conformity within society and specific social groups. They help to create common group behaviour and expectations and are important to the smooth running of society. As well as norms of interpersonal trust and reciprocity, there are expectations of behaviour and of honesty and confidentiality within personal social networks and wider communities. Again, this can be a difficult thing to evaluate; many measures used or quoted in the literature are about shared values, such as, “Suppose you lost your wallet in the street in this neighbourhood. How likely is it that it would be returned with nothing missing?” (Home Office Citizenship Survey, 2001, cited by ONS, 2002, p. 84). As Yang notes, it is “difficult to find the shared norms or values, if there is any, carried by the group or network” (2007, p. 24).

Measures used for the evaluation of levels of social capital vary according to the focus of the research; for example, whether the aim is to measure individual or community social capital. Other examples are: membership of local organisations; involvement in volunteering; a sense of being able to influence decisions in the local area; frequency of contact with people in social networks; number and variety of connections; and number of confidants (ONS, 2002).

2.6.3 Social capital and online interaction

While the definitions and measures discussed above in Sections 2.6.1 and 2.6.2 were predominantly created in order to evaluate offline social capital, they are also used to investigate the impact of online interactions on social capital. As noted above, the ease with which new connections and communities can be formed online has meant that there has been a great deal of research into how the Internet affects social capital over the past two decades (Best & Krueger, 2006; Sabatini & Sarracino, 2013; Valenzuela, Park & Kee, 2008; Vitak et al., 2011; Wellman et al., 2001; Young, 2011).

Online interaction enables both bonding and bridging social capital, although since the Internet has generally been considered to facilitate the development of weak ties (Section 2.8.3.1), much of the literature has assumed that it is particularly suited to the creation of the bridging function (Best & Krueger, 2006; Ellison et al., 2007; Sum et al., 2008; Vitak et al., 2011; Williams, 2006).

There has been less research into the specific question of whether bonding social capital can be created and utilised online (Williams, 2006); it could be argued that the prevalence of the use of social networking sites and online communities to maintain existing, offline friendships (see Sections 2.8.3.2, 4.4 and 7.6) means that it can be difficult to evaluate purely online bonding social capital.

Williams developed scales for measuring both online and offline social capital. He acknowledges that the bridging function is more likely to develop online: “One speculation is that the social capital generated by online communities is moderated by the relatively low entry and exit costs there compared to offline life” (2006, p. 611). However, he also suggests that, notwithstanding factors such as race, gender and education, bonding social capital could occur online.

Do online groups provide the same kinds of psychological, emotional, and practical support as their real-world counterparts, even without the power of face-to-face interactions? And do Internet users feel the kinds of reciprocal bonds that would lead them to contribute to their online communities? (Williams, 2006, p. 611)

The type of online interaction affects the type, and the extent, of social capital created. Social networking sites, such as Facebook, are generally considered to foster weak connections, but since they are often used to maintain offline relationships with family

and friends, they can facilitate strong ties and bonding social capital. Online communities, on the other hand, would appear to be more likely to foster strong ties since they are based around common interests and often encourage self-disclosure (for example in the blog communities on LiveJournal). Online communities, however, are more likely to facilitate or encourage anonymity; many SNSs such as Facebook, Twitter and Google Plus require, or rather request, users to use their real name to register. Nissenbaum, writing about the development of trust in online communities, suggests that this anonymity means that trust cannot develop: “Although this ability to engage online anonymously is beneficial in a number of ways, it shrinks the range of cues that can act as triggers of trust or upon which people base decisions to trust” (2001, p. 126); and, as discussed above, without trust the development of social capital is difficult, if not impossible. Steinfield et al. agree, stating that “disclosure [of personal information], while raising concerns about privacy, also appears to be essential for the functioning of the site and for enabling the kinds of relationship developments that result in bridging and bonding social capital benefits” (2012, p. 10).

Ultimately, although there is still a great deal of discussion in the literature regarding social capital and Internet use, there appears to be a consensus that, to a greater or lesser extent, “Social network sites (SNSs) ... appear to be well suited to social capital accumulation” (Vitak et al., 2011, p. 1).

2.7 Adult Friendship

It seems to be customary, when introducing an academic discussion on friendship, to note that it is an extremely difficult subject to define or to measure in a consistent way: “its definition varies across individuals, as friendship is voluntary and not subject to as many institutional constraints as are family and neighbor relationships.” (Adams, Blieszner, & DeVries, 2000, n.p.). Despite this, there is a large corpus of research on friendship which aims to achieve both of these goals.

Plato wrote, “I should greatly prefer a real friend to all the gold of Darius” (380 BCE/2009, n.p.). There is no doubt that friendship brings significant benefits; not only in providing affection, companionship and support, but increasingly in the creation of a ‘family of choice’ – “a phrase that originated in the gay community but which adds potency to the idea

of personal communities” (Pahl, 2000, p. 3). Pahl suggests that, as people tend to move away from their family and to create close social networks of friends based on location rather than familial ties, there is “increasing survey evidence to support the growing practical importance of friends” (Pahl, 2000, p. 8).

Even without a specific, all-encompassing definition of friendship, there are defining characteristics which are common to much of the literature and which are used both to describe and to attempt to measure friendship.

2.7.1 Definitions of friendship

Philosophical exploration into the importance of and variations within friendship has been conducted for thousands of years. Plato’s dialogue on friendship, *Lysis*, written around 380 BCE, is still cited frequently in the literature; his pupil Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (written around 340 BCE) probably more so. When attempting to define friendship, scholars frequently focus on the different levels of friendship experienced by individuals.

Aristotle divided friendships into three categories: of utility, of pleasure and of virtue. Friendships of utility are made with those who are, or may be, useful and are often better described as acquaintances: for example, a shopkeeper, a neighbour, or a mechanic. A friendship of utility can be broken fairly easily as circumstances change, with no harm or ill-feeling to either party. Friends of pleasure are closer than acquaintances, and are people who enjoy spending time together. They may share hobbies or a sense of humour. ““Friendship between the young is thought to be grounded on pleasure, because the lives of the young are regulated by their feelings and their chief interest is in their own pleasure and the opportunity of the moment” (1156a30)” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Irwin, cited by Dawson, 2012, p. 2). Friendships of pleasure were considered by Aristotle to be unlikely to last “since the emotions that they are grounded upon are ultimately unstable” (Mullis, 2010, p. 395).

Friendships of virtue, also known as friendships of good and as ‘perfect’ friendships, are probably what we would call very close, or best, friends. Perfect friendship

is based upon goodness. In this kind of friendship each friend wishes good for the other, as a fellow good person.... Each friend wishes for the others [*sic*] good not for their own sake but for the friend’s sake. Such friends are also

pleasing and useful to one another because the conduct of good people is pleasing. (Dawson, 2012, p. 2)

These virtuous friends “are soul-mates, friends who mirror each other and enable each to see himself clearly and who “recognize each other’s moral excellence.”” (Pahl, 2000, p. 22).

Cocking and Kennett attempted to “arrive at a new account of the nature of close or companion friendships”: the close, intimate friendships “which feature reciprocal deep affection, well-wishing, and the desire for shared experiences” (1998, p. 502). They note that two established elements of close friendship, as discussed in the “philosophical literature on friendship” (pp. 502-503), are high levels of self-disclosure and the degree “to which we see ourselves in the close friend” (p. 503). They describe these views of friendship as, respectively, the “secrets view” and the “mirror view”. Rather than the established accounts of close friends as being those with whom we will share our thoughts and confidences, or those who share our personal values and morals, Cocking and Kennett argue that neither of these views truly captures what makes close friendship different from other relationships. They suggest, instead, that one is “directed” by a close friend (encouraged to do something different, or changed as a result of the friendship) (p. 504). They further suggest that close friends can shape “character and ... self-conception” (p. 505) through their honest recognition or interpretation of personality flaws or traits.

It is clear from the brief discussion above that any attempt at a concise definition of friendship is closely linked to the characteristics which can be used to evaluate and measure individuals’ experiences of it.

2.7.2 Measures of friendship

The connections and friendships made between individuals, whether online or offline, are known as interpersonal ties, and are generally categorised as strong, weak or absent (Granovetter, 1973). Strong ties exist between individuals who know each other well; weak ties between people who see each other infrequently; and absent ties are those interactions which do not hold any significance, for example between commuters who regularly travel on the same train. Weak ties may result in the

greatest benefit to individuals, as they are between people who do not move in the same circles and therefore have access to different information.

Friendships are made for different reasons and exist at different depths of affection: despite this, or perhaps because of it, there is a great deal of literature regarding its characteristics, its effects and its importance. Nonetheless, “Friendship, more perhaps than any other aspect of our social lives, has eluded the attempts of social scientists to be classified and codified.” (Pahl, 2000, p. 142).

Affection or devotion is an intrinsic part of friendship (Adams et al., 2000; Baym, 2011; Briggles, 2008); while it is one of the few elements which could be called a defining characteristic of being a friend, it is rarely used as a measure because of the difficulty of quantifying and comparing levels of emotion. Related factors such as enjoyment of each other’s company (as in Aristotle’s friendships of pleasure) are often mentioned in the friendship literature (Adams et al., 2000; Baym, 2011; Briggles, 2008; Pahl, 2000) although, again, while it is important it can be difficult to evaluate other than as a yes or no answer.

Having interests or hobbies in common is a significant factor in the development of friendships (Bane et al., 2010; Dawson, 2012; Pahl, 2000; Vitak et al., 2011): taking part in shared activities is described by Adams et al. as “concrete evidence of friendship” (2000, n.p.). A related though opposite view, as suggested by Cocking and Kennett (see Section 2.7.1 above) is that a friendship can lead to the taking up of new hobbies or interests, perhaps in order to maintain or strengthen the friendship. A similar idea which often appears in friendship literature is that of friends having personality traits in common, or being of a ‘similar type’; what Cocking and Kennett described as the “mirror view” of friendship. “Homophily is the principle that a contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people” (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001, p. 416). However, as with bonding social capital (Section 2.6.1.1), homophily, or what Verbrugge calls the “homogeneity bias” (1977, p. 592), can lead to inward-looking social networks made up of ‘people like us’, restricting the information that participants receive, their opinions and attitudes, and their interactions (McPherson et al., 2001, p. 415). Spencer and Pahl, in their

research published in 2006, asked participants about the things they had in common with friends, and how their friends differed from one another (pp. 232-233).

Trust is frequently cited as a significant element and measure of friendship (Adamic, Lauterbach, Teng & Ackerman, 2011; Adams et al., 2000; Bane et al., 2010; Pahl, 2000; Whitty & Gavin, 2001). It is described as being necessary both for its formation and for its development: “it is commonly held that good friendships are characterized by a certain degree of intimacy and that such intimacy cannot be achieved if the friends do not trust one another” (Mullis, 2010, p. 399). There is, additionally, an assumption of confidentiality and loyalty: “We expect our friends to be loyal [and] to keep confidences” (Pahl, 2000, p. 85).

Trust is closely connected to many other elements of friendship: while it is not, in most cases, the only measure used, it is a prerequisite for many of the established measures discussed below and in later chapters.

Self-disclosure is also a widely discussed element of friendship (Adams et al., 2000; Bane et al., 2010; Baym, 2000, 2011; Mendelson & Kay, 2003). “By sharing secrets we make ourselves vulnerable to the other, which is a sign of trust and probably affection” (Pahl, 2000, p. 83). Again, the element of self-disclosure relates to other key friendship measures; in the same way that a level of trust can inspire self-disclosure, the process of the voluntary sharing of personal information not only leads to an increase in dyadic trust, but also serves as proof of affection and of a willingness to be vulnerable to another person.

Both self-disclosure and trust are seen as reciprocal, particularly in strong friendships; “In a reciprocal relationship, we trust others not because we have common ends, but because each of us holds the fate of others in our hands in a manner of tit-for-tat” (Nissenbaum, 2001, p. 645). In friendships which are not entirely equal, i.e. where one partner holds more affection for the other or where one is less willing to disclose, reciprocity can be problematic, and this can lead to a breakdown of the friendship. Although reciprocity is important in other types of relationships, it is particularly so for friendships due to their voluntary nature and their lack of clear social boundaries:

without reciprocal good will and affection, a 'perfect' friendship may be reduced to one of utility or pleasure, or be lost altogether (Mullis, 2010, pp. 395-396).

An element of friendship which can be quantified is the frequency of contact between dyadic partners, whether this is face to face or by other means such as the telephone or online. This is frequently mentioned as being crucial to the maintenance and the quality of friendship (Adams et al., 2000; Haythornthwaite, 2001; Pahl, 2000; Patterson, Bettini & Nussbaum, 1993).

Similarly, a common question in surveys about friendship is about the number of people a respondent can count on for support, whether emotional or practical. Research has shown that "most people's friendships do have clear boundaries of obligations" (Pahl, 2000, p. 38). Friends, family and professionals are in separate categories when it comes to specific problems such as money, relationships, or a household emergency.

Emotional support and the ability to ask for help connects to the concepts of acceptance, honesty, and the ability to be yourself (Baym, 2011; Briggles, 2008; Pahl, 2000; Whitty & Gavin, 2001). "The real friend is honest about his faults as well as mine, an act that requires time for reflection and a level of vulnerability" (Briggles, 2008, p. 78). Thus there is a need within close friendship not only to open oneself up to potentially painful truths from a friend, but also perhaps to be able to be apart from each other in order to assimilate those truths. This seems to negate the measure of friendship by frequency of contact, although it corresponds to the adage 'absence makes the heart grow fonder' and to the well-known idea that true friends can be separated for months or even years and yet, when they meet again, it is as though no time has passed.

In summary, there are many elements of friendship which are discussed to a greater or lesser extent in the literature, some of which are used to attempt to evaluate individuals' quality or levels of friendships. However, as Adams et al. note, "It is not appropriate to assume that people share common criteria for friendship"; they suggest that researchers should "take care to solicit respondents' own definitions of friendship

as well as their distinctions among types of friends before proceeding to query them on other aspects of friendship” (2000, n.p.).

2.8 Online Friendship

It can be difficult, when interrogating the literature, to differentiate between research into romantic and platonic relationships online. The word 'relationship' is used to cover a variety of depths of connection between individuals or within groups, and titles and abstracts do not always specify the type of connection being studied.

Bury notes that a large amount of literature has been produced regarding relationships in online contexts, primarily within the field of CMC. Areas studied include identity play, community dynamics and online dating or sex. “Although aspects of friendship have been touched on in these areas, little has been written specifically about friendships formed through online interaction” (2008, p. 174). Though researchers such as danah boyd (2006), Chenault (1998), and McKenna et al. (2002) have investigated the connections which are created within online communities, Holland and Harpin agree, stating that “little empirical research has been done about friendship per se until relatively recently” (2008, p. 124).

Whitty and Joinson (2008) observe that, due to the “unique qualities of cyberspace, researchers have argued that it is difficult to initiate and develop ‘real’ relationships within this space” (p. 21). Nonetheless, they believe that genuine and solid relationships can develop online: “Despite all the negative press that online relating has received, there is a plethora of academic papers which have shown that real friendships ... do initiate online and can move successfully offline” (p. 23). Whitty and Joinson do not always differentiate between friendships and romantic relationships when using the word ‘relationship’. When they write about friendship, they sometimes use quotes or citations which refer to romantic relationships. As noted above, this is not unique in literature in this field, but can be frustrating.

2.8.1 Early research into online friendship

Online communities and social networking sites are subject to rapid change and evolution, and research within these areas tends to date quickly; therefore the majority of the literature surveyed is from 2005 onwards. A number of significant studies were

undertaken in the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, and although the types of communities and the abilities and demographics of the users may be considerably different to those found in current studies, the research and conclusions reached may still be relevant today.

Nancy Baym's ethnographic study (see Section 2.4) was conducted primarily in the early 1990s, though she revisited the group in 1998 in order to evaluate any changes that had occurred in the years since the evolution of the World Wide Web and the new types of online communities. She noted that dyadic relationships or "friendship pairs ... often develop out of Usenet groups" (2000, p. 134) and in fact a number of members of r.a.t.s., the newsgroup she studied, "indicated that they had formed a small number of close one-on-one friendships through the group" (p. 134). Baym believed that, "[if] r.a.t.s. is any indication, then online friendships are comparable to and compatible with face-to-face friendships, but at least for most participants, they do not replace them" (p. 137).

Malcolm Parks and Kory Floyd conducted survey research in newsgroups in order to discover how frequently friendships were created online, by whom, how close they become and whether they migrate to other settings. They found that "Across the total sample ... 30% had what might legitimately be considered a highly developed personal relationship" (Parks & Floyd, 1996, pp. 91-92) and they concluded that, "for most of [the] respondents, cyberspace is simply another place to meet" (p. 94). Parks undertook similar research in MOOs (Multi-User Dungeon, Object-Oriented) with Lynne Roberts in 1997, comparing relationship development online with that of offline friendships. Again, a significant majority of respondents reported making friends in the online environment and, as in Parks and Floyd's research, the more active an individual was in their online community, the more likely they were to have formed a relationship, and thus "developing personal relationships on-line may be more of a function of simple familiarity and experience than demographic factors or personality" (Parks & Roberts, 1997, n.p.).

Katz and Aspden undertook research in 1995 to "compare "real world" participation for Internet users and non-users, and to examine friendship creation via the Internet" (1997, p. 82). 14% of the respondents who used the Internet ("a significant minority")

reported having online-only friends, and Katz and Aspden concluded, as did Parks and Floyd, and Parks and Roberts, that Internet skills were the predominant factor in whether or not friendships were formed online. Kraut et al. (1998), whose research sample had one or two years' experience online, reported that the majority of online relationships discovered in their research were weak ties, and that "making new friends on-line was rare" (p. 1029). They acknowledged that the results could have been very different if their sample had a different level of experience, though they did not go so far as to suggest that Internet experience and friendship creation could be linked (Kraut et al., 1998, p. 1029).

McKenna et al.'s 2002 article reports on studies undertaken in 1997 and 1999, investigating whether the ability to project one's "true" self online resulted in closer and more long-lasting relationships. The authors randomly selected 20 Usenet newsgroups and sent a survey to every fifth poster in each newsgroup, up to 100 posters. They found that those who located their "real self" online were more likely to make friends online, though were not significantly more likely to meet those friends face-to-face or, in the case of romantic relationships, to get engaged to someone met online. Women were more likely than men to describe their online friendships as closer and deeper. The participants were re-contacted two years later in order to discover whether the friendships formed online were still stable after a period of time: 75% of all relationships were continuing, with the majority of acquaintanceships and friendships becoming closer and stronger.

McKenna et al. conducted an additional laboratory experiment using New York University students to discover the effect that an initial interaction via the Internet, rather than face-to-face, had on how much strangers liked each other after that first interaction. They found that those who met their partner first via an online chat had a significantly greater level of liking for their partner than those who first met their partner face-to-face. The authors concluded that "individuals use [the Internet] as a means not only of maintaining ties with existing family and friends but also of forming close and meaningful new relationships in a relatively nonthreatening environment" (2002, p. 30).

2.8.2 New concepts of friendship

Some researchers are of the opinion that online communities and social networking sites may change the nature of friendship altogether. David Beer believes that “it is possible that SNS, as they become mainstream, might well have an influence on what friendship means, how it is understood, and, ultimately, how it is played out” (Beer, 2008, p. 521).

Miller and Slater, who conducted an ethnographic study of Internet users in Trinidad, agree that the concept of friendship may be altered by conducting relationships online.

In contrast to family relationships, friendships, acquaintances and chat partners point to less well-defined relationships that can be more ambiguous when pursued online. Establishing their character and status as relationships may need more reflection, since they may take novel forms that have to be assessed in terms of new normative concepts of friendship. (2000, p. 61)

Mike Thelwall, in his study of homophily (the tendency to make friendships with people who are similar) among MySpace ‘Friends’, observes that making friends online should reduce that tendency (2009a, p. 219). He notes, however, that in previous studies of “members of MySpace and the similar site Facebook, [weaker] connections have tended to reflect or support offline networks while also allowing new friendships to form” (p. 220). Despite the connections which are created between strangers on the website, “MySpace does not seem to be changing friendship to the extent that it supports significant numbers of previously unknown people to become genuine friends, and so it may not be revolutionary in this sense” (p. 220).

As Whitty and Joinson state,

real relationships do initiate into a variety of spaces online and many successfully move to offline spaces. How individuals present themselves on the Internet partly determines whether the relationship will endure. Furthermore, to date we find that the socially anxious and shy often prefer meeting others online. (2008, p. 31)

2.8.3 To a common ground

*“Our Similarities bring us to a common ground;
our Differences allow us to be fascinated by each other”*
(Tom Robbins)

H.H. Clark stated that intimacy or familiarity changes according to how much common ground two people have. He defined different relationships as: “Strangers: no personal common ground; Acquaintances: limited personal common ground; Friends: extensive personal common ground; Intimates: extensive personal common ground, including private information” (cited by Jacobson, 2008, p. 220). Shared knowledge and beliefs create strong connections between individuals. This echoes Julia T. Wood's theory of relational culture, which describes how communication partners construct a subjective, interpretive understanding of their shared world. They create and develop processes, patterns and structures within that world which have meaning to them (Wood, 1982, p. 76).

The common ground which brings us together as friends or acquaintances is no longer solely geographical. Where once ties, whether strong or weak, were created by face-to-face contact between those who lived in the same neighbourhood or who worked or studied in the same place,

increasing globalisation is leading to an ever-decreasing importance for geographical location when it comes to forming and maintaining social relations. The world is becoming increasingly connected, and, as a consequence, friendships can be formed and maintained at a deep level, regardless of the geographical distance. (Holland & Harpin, 2008, p. 123)

This reflects the findings of Miller and Slater (2000), who stated that the Internet

opens up the possibility of engaging online with people from anywhere in the world whom one has not and probably will not meet face-to-face; and these contacts are likely to be made through interests or even through random meetings and coincidences. (p. 61).

They also noted that regular contact between individuals, whether online or offline, results in a shared world-view, and thus to the “sharing of intimacies, problems, perspectives and values, so that you not only feel that the other really knows you, and vice versa, but also that they [are] reliably ‘there for you’ as a persistent and embodied ethical other” (p. 66).

McKenna et al. (2002) theorised that those who are more comfortable showing their ““true” or inner” selves on the Internet than in person are more likely to form close relationships online (p. 9). The authors believe that close and intimate relationships can be built more quickly on the Internet than offline due to a reduction in “gates” and barriers to the development of friendships, and because those friendships are based on more robust foundations such as common interests rather than, for example, physical attractiveness (p. 11). They note that, as mentioned in Section 2.5.3, people “tend to be more attracted to others who are similar to ourselves and share our opinions” (2002, p. 11). It can often be easier to find others who share specific interests on the Internet than it is in a local geographical area, “and when people get to know one another in the traditional manner, it generally takes time to establish whether they have commonalities and to what extent” (McKenna et al., 2002, p. 11).

McEwan and Zanolli state that, while SNS users often know each other offline, members of online communities tend to be strangers who are brought together by common interests. Friendships are therefore more likely to be formed because of an assumption of similarity with fellow members:

On a message board, where individuals are physically isolated from each other, mostly visually anonymous, and joining the board due to a shared interest, individuals who are highly engaged with the online group [are] likely to think highly of their co-interactants. (McEwan & Zanolli, 2013, p. 1566)

2.8.3.1 The strength of weak ties

Much of the literature regarding the development of social connections via the Internet suggests that weak ties are more likely to be created than strong ties (Best & Krueger, 2006; Haythornthwaite, 2001; Steinfield et al., 2012, Wellman et al., 2001). This directly relates to the widespread assumption that use of online communities and social networking sites is more likely to result in bridging social capital than bonding social capital, as discussed in Section 2.6 above (Ellison et al., 2009; Kobayashi, 2010; Kwon, D’Angelo & McLeod, 2013).

Best and Krueger (2006) note that the limitations which are placed on online interactions can inhibit the evolution of strong ties. “[T]he reduction of social cues makes it far more difficult to develop the intimacy and confidence

necessary to deepen relationships. Therefore, the Internet is more conducive for the development of weak ties rather than strong ties” (p. 397). As part of their study, the authors asked respondents to “evaluate whether most people can be “trusted,” “expected to return favors,” and “expected to do what is right,” using 11-point continuous response scales” (p. 401). They found that interaction with “new online relations” (p. 404) positively related to these items, although the authors concluded that “online social interactions likely do not produce strong connections that elicit intense loyalty” (p. 404).

Ploderer et al., researching in an online bodybuilders' community, discovered that many of their participants had formed connections with other members of the community through their shared interests, though “the participants often referred to them as “acquaintances” rather than “friends.” (2008, p. 339). They investigated the use of online resources to “alleviate [the] isolation” (p. 335) which these bodybuilders can feel as a result of having few people they can talk to about their passion, or of having competitive relationships with other bodybuilders with whom they come into contact in their everyday lives.

However, as mentioned above, ‘weak’ does not necessarily mean unimportant. Ellison et al. note that “weak ties are valuable conduits to diverse perspectives and new information” (2009, p. 7) and that, with the use of social networking sites, very little effort is needed to keep up to date with acquaintances and thereby to maintain ties which, though weak, may be useful in future.

Best and Krueger mention Granovetter’s 1973 work, which argues that “as networks widen, the number of people individuals can trust and reciprocate with grows” (2006, p. 397). They note that increased strength in ties reduces (or constrains) the expansion of networks. Therefore stronger ties result in less independence of social circles, and thus reduce individuals’ chances of meeting new people and making new contacts. “In contrast, weakly tied pairs are more likely to possess disparate friendship circles, thereby providing opportunities for individuals to expand their networks and develop generalized trust” (p. 397).

2.8.3.2 Existing ties

Though some researchers into online interactions believe that new ties are created due to shared interests or experiences (Brandtzæg & Heim, 2009; Ploderer et al., 2008), others believe that the majority of online connections are between those who already know each other offline, or who are connected in a more distant way, for example as ‘friends of friends’ (boyd, 2008; boyd & Ellison, 2008; Wellman et al., 2001).

Boase and Wellman, writing in 2004, stated that “a relatively small minority of internet users actually use the internet to communicate with people that they do not already know from their everyday lives” (p. 9). “Rather, the internet [is] adding to the overall volume of communication, helping to maintain the kinds of relationships that have existed for decades” (p. 16).

The growth in the availability and popularity of mobile social networking, connecting via smartphones or tablet devices using wireless or mobile communication technology, has increased the use of social networking sites for the maintenance of existing ties. “Online communication tools such as ... social networking sites, email and instant messaging play an increasing role in how people keep in touch with existing friends and family” (Randall, 2011, pp. 9-10). Not only are relationships with distant friends and relatives maintained online, but also those with people who are geographically close: in addition to the convenience and low cost of contacting members of a social network via SNSs, some authors have suggested that the stronger the tie strength, the more likely it is that multiple means of communication will be employed (Haythornthwaite, 2001; Vitak et al., 2011).

2.8.4 Are ‘Friends’ the same as friends?

Any discussion of the similarities or differences between online friends and everyday, face-to-face friends is going to encounter problems of terminology. The majority of social networking sites use the term ‘friend’ to illustrate a connection between individuals on the site, and this has led to new verbs within the world of social networking. To ‘friend’ is to publicly demonstrate one’s connection to another member of the SNS; to ‘defriend’ or ‘unfriend’ is to disconnect from that person. In

order to differentiate between online connections and offline, everyday connections, some researchers (d. boyd, 2006; boyd & Ellison, 2008; Holland & Harpin, 2008; Thelwall, 2009a) have utilised capitalisation: 'Friend' for online and 'friend' for offline.

The question of whether a 'true', deep friendship can be established in a purely online setting has been addressed by a number of studies in the past few years. While it is generally acknowledged by researchers that online and offline friendships can possess similar characteristics and can thus be measured in similar ways, there is sometimes debate about whether the intrinsic qualities of the relationship can be the same.

danah boyd used Friendster and MySpace to investigate how "Friendship helps people write community into being in social network sites" (2006, n.p.). She noted that the assumption of Friendster's founders that users would only link to people that they knew in their everyday lives was short-lived:

When Friendster launched, its founders expected users to list only their "actual" friends; this was not the norm amongst early adopters. Their list of Friends on the site included fellow partygoers, people they knew (and people they thought they knew), old college mates that they hadn't talked to in years, people with entertaining Profiles, and anyone that they found interesting. Not everyone took the Friendship process seriously. (d. boyd, 2006, n.p.)

This assumption of Friendster's founders, as reported by boyd, is not uncommon. Many SNSs were developed with the expectation that users would only Friend people with whom they were friends in other contexts (Boase & Wellman, 2004; Vitak et al., 2011; Wellman et al., 2001). danah boyd disagrees with that assumption, believing rather that networks of friends which are articulated on SNSs do not necessarily relate to other contexts and networks outside the SNS. Writing with Nicole Ellison, she states that "'Friends' on SNSs are not the same as 'friends' in the everyday sense; instead, Friends provide context by offering users an imagined audience to guide behavioral norms" (boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 220).

Nancy Baym found that behavioural norms in the community she studied evolved from the norms of offline life: how to treat one another, address one another, defuse difficult situations, etc. "People create an atmosphere of friendship on r.a.t.s. by treating one another as they would treat their friends—with kindness, breadth, depth,

and an accepting attitude that goes beyond what is called for by the task at hand” (2000, p. 135). However, although Baym found considerable similarities between the creation of online and offline friendships, she noted that the two were not always considered identical by those involved. Some of her participants described their online relationships as friendships, and other members as friends, while others “qualified their descriptions in ways that indicated, if not the lesser worth, at least the greater strangeness of online friendships” (p. 136). However, the participants in Baym’s research who did develop strong friendships online found them to be just as important as those which were part of their offline lives. “Online worlds develop affective dimensions and experiences, and these feelings, situated in the bodies of group members, do not distinguish between *virtual* and *real*” (2000, p. 205).

McKenna et al. believe that relationships which start online can become closer and more intimate more quickly than those which start offline, because it is possible to meet through shared interests and because self-disclosure is easier. They also believe that the relationship should endure for longer and “should also be able to better survive a face-to-face meeting” (2002, p. 11). (They appear, in this section, to be writing about romantic relationships, although it may be that it is the language that they are using which makes this seem to be the case.)

David Beer (2008) also believes that, as SNS use becomes ubiquitous and as the members of Generation Y⁵ grow up “and are informed by the connections they make on SNS” (p. 520), an ‘everyday’ friend can indeed be an SNS friend, or vice versa. Online cannot be completely separated from offline. This view is echoed by Rhianon Bury, whose chapter considers women’s online friendships. Although virtual friendships or communication are limited in terms of a lack of visual cues and certainty of gender, race or class, Bury does not believe that there is a significant difference between ‘real’ and remote relationships. Bury contacted her previous research participants, five of whom agreed to take part in two weeks of email exchanges to discuss online friendship. Each of them had a number of long-term online, or remotely embodied friendships (REFs) which were meaningful and may

5 Generation Y is a shorthand term used to describe the generation of people born from the early 1980s to the early 2000s (although the dates vary slightly among researchers and commentators). For more discussion regarding the different demographically-identified age ranges, see Section 4.9.

have included contact outside CMC. There had been REFs that ended, either suddenly or by gradually “petering out”. All participants reported more REFs than real life friends (RLFs), and Bury noted that though the RLFs may have been longer-standing, they were not necessarily more close. One of Bury’s participants summed it up: “The distance is a barrier, but it’s more of a barrier to fun than to intimacy” (2008, p. 195).

Chan and Cheng, comparing the online and offline friendships of Hong Kong newsgroup users, asked participants about interdependence, breadth (of discussion topics), depth, code changes (nicknames, private jokes), understanding, commitment, and network convergence. The authors found that offline friendships were generally rated higher in all of the categories than online friendships; they suggested that this was due to the reduced cues in social interaction online. However, this was only true for friendships of less than one year’s duration; after a year “the differences between the two types of friendship were minimal” (Chan & Cheng, 2004, p. 316).

Similar results were found by Bane et al., who investigated female bloggers’ levels of self-disclosure online and their perceptions of friendship, both online and offline. Their research showed that online friendships were seen by participants as less likely to provide them with emotional support, practical help, and trust and/or loyalty. They also considered mutual disclosure, empathy and shared interests to be more likely in offline than in online friendships. Bane et al. suggest that lower satisfaction levels with regard to online friendships might result from the lack of “physical contact, which has been identified as an important dimension of intimacy in friendship” (2010, p. 135). They further suggest, similarly to Chan and Cheng, that the duration of the friendships being considered might be a factor: since Bane et al.’s participants were all aged over 18, they could have been considering long-term friendships when they thought of offline friends, while online friendships were probably of shorter duration.

Dutton et al., in the 2013 Oxford Internet Survey (OxIS) report, *Cultures of the Internet: The Internet in Britain*, reported that use of SNSs was levelling off at about 60%. Furthermore, they found that in each of the three most recent OxIS reports, covering 2009-2013, “the proportion of people who met someone online they did not know before has remained virtually the same at approximately 40%” (p. 42). The

authors suggest that this “may indicate some emerging stability in the ways that the Internet is reconfiguring how we come to know other people. The Internet is becoming an accepted point in a series of stages involved in meeting someone offline” (p. 43).

Bury concluded that “Long-term online friendships among educated, middle-aged, heterosexual women are not only as significant as those based [in everyday life] but often are more so due to gender-related constraints and pressures” (2008, p. 196). She also noted that the transfer of a relationship from online to offline was not always necessary in order to deepen the friendship.

2.8.4.1 No perfect friendship online?

There has been, and continues to be, debate among friendship scholars about the value of online friendship; in terms of the potential for an Aristotelian friendship of virtue, however, the argument has so far been weighted heavily on the negative side. In 2000, Cocking and Matthews argued that the limitations of interactions online mean that the “relational identity” which is part of close friendship cannot be developed. Referring to the reduced cues inherent in online interaction, they state that the reliance on the Internet of voluntary self-disclosure is a significant drawback with regard to the development of close online friendship. The lack of “non-voluntary self-disclosure” (p. 227) means that there is no way to discover the things that we learn about each other face-to-face by the way the other behaves, rather than what they tell us. We may not think, or know, to reveal certain things about ourselves in text which another could observe in person, and thus “within a purely virtual context the establishment of close friendship is simply psychologically impossible” (Cocking & Matthews, 2000, p. 224).

Adam Briggie responded to Cocking and Matthews’ earlier article, arguing that any failure to promote friendship online would not be due to an intrinsic inadequacy of the Internet, but would rather be “due primarily to cultural trends and personal decisions about media use” (2008, p. 72). Briggie suggests that the distance and, in most cases, asynchronicity of online interactions can lead to friendships which are as close, or closer, than those created offline (p. 73); he

adds that it can be particularly useful for promoting self-disclosure and reciprocal sharing, and encouraging a deep knowledge of the other, which can be difficult to do in everyday life. “If used conscientiously as a laboratory for sincere self-exploration and honest mutual exchange, there is no reason that the Internet cannot support wholly mediated close friendships” (Briggle, 2008, p. 78).

Soraker suggests that the “lack of non-voluntary self-disclosure can be (partly) compensated by increased voluntary self-disclosure, and virtual worlds allow many people to more easily express themselves due to pseudonymity” (Soraker, 2012, p. 218). His research focuses on the friendships created within virtual worlds such as World of Warcraft and Second Life and, although he seems to make some sweeping assumptions about the relationships created in those environments (e.g. that gaming friends do not move their relationship offline, and that people do not game with existing offline friends), he does not reach an entirely negative conclusion about the value of online friendships. His primary concern throughout the article is whether online friendships tend to take the place of those that are created and maintained face-to-face. “That is, as long as virtual friendships are not seen as intrinsically detrimental to well-being (which few would argue), the only way in which they can be detrimental to well-being is by replacing that which is more valuable” (Soraker, 2012, p. 212).

Using Aristotle’s theory of friendship, Fröding and Peterson state that a “friendship that exists on the internet, and seldom or never is combined with real life interaction” (2012, p. 202) does not qualify as a genuine friendship. They argue that the control inherent in online interactions shown by, for example, making the choice to go online, or avoiding it when in a bad mood or when likely to be interrupted, means that it is too restrictive to encourage the sharing of deep and important matters which Aristotelian perfect friendship requires. This argument leads into their main concern: that of honesty. If participants are deliberately showing their ‘best side’ online, they are being dishonest. Fröding and Peterson suggest that professional networking sites such as LinkedIn can create the lesser forms of friendship, as long as no false assumptions (of potential friendships) are allowed. However, they state that SNSs “do not even

meet the criteria for ‘lesser friendship’” (p. 206), and that users are given false expectations of the use of these sites.

In other words, what is flagged as a fast-track to meaningful social relationships and social inclusion is in fact an illusion as these relationships, whatever else they may be, do not contain the necessary components that go into genuine friendship. (Fröding & Peterson, 2012, p. 206)

2.9 Online and Offline

As is clear from the literature discussed in the sections above, online friendships are created in a variety of virtual environments. They range from casual acquaintanceship to close friendship, and exist in a variety of forms: an online connection may stay entirely online; a friendship may be maintained both online and offline; an online friendship may be moved entirely offline; or an offline friendship could be moved entirely online.

Each of the above types of friendship has been discussed in this literature review. This section expands on the concept of ‘online-to-offline’ friendships; relationships which begin online and move, either entirely or to a large extent, offline, being incorporated into participants’ everyday social circles. This is still a relatively under-studied area; although the impact of meeting an online friend in person has been studied extensively, there has been less research into the experiences of everyday social media users of meeting long-standing online friends and whether those friends are subsequently integrated into offline social circles.

The transfer of online friendships to face-to-face interaction has been described in the literature as ‘modality switching’. A number of authors have investigated the impact of this switching using university students in controlled experiments (Ramirez & Wang, 2008; Ramirez & Zhang, 2007; Walther, Loh & Granka, 2005). McEwan and Zanolta argue that these methods can result in a lack of ecological validity:

Individuals may behave differently in experimental settings, even online experimental settings than they would if left to their own devices. In particular, one’s perceptions of the future of a relationship ... may be different and/or produce different effects in a situation where an online relationship is developing organically than one where the relational acquaintances were introduced by the researchers and may assume the relationship will be discontinued when the experiment ends. (2013, p. 1567)

Although there is an overall dearth of research into the migration of online friends to the physical social environment of their dyadic partner, a number of studies have been conducted over the past twenty years or so in which this aspect of online friendship has been discussed, although it has often been tangential to the primary research subject (Amichai-Hamburger & Hayat, 2013; Baym, 2000; Dutton et al., 2013; McKenna et al., 2002; Parks & Roberts, 1997; Ploderer et al., 2008; Westcott & Owen, 2013).

Much of the research reports a “typical sequence of communicative channels” (Whitty & Gavin, 2001, p. 626) as online friends move from purely-online to face-to-face; for example, from chat rooms to email to meeting in person. Parks and Roberts (1997) found that around 20% of their respondents who had made friends in a MOO had gone on to meet them in person, but that less than 8% of them had moved straight from online to face-to-face; most had moved through two or more channels (most commonly email, telephone calls and exchanging photographs) before meeting. This was also stated, more recently, by Whitty and Joinson (2008). Whitty and Gavin (2001) suggest that this progression illustrates the increase in trust levels, and commitment, between the friends. They found that, having progressed through these stages and met in person, some participants believed that the online element of the relationship became obsolete (p. 627).

Westcott and Owen, in their research on friendship development on Twitter, do not mention whether any of their participants had progressed their friendships through different channels before meeting in person. However, they believe that their article “highlighted a pre-friendship screening phase on Twitter that does not exist offline” (Westcott & Owen, 2013, p. 322). The “friendship rituals” which take place on Twitter, some of which are similar to those enacted in the development of face-to-face friendships, result in reciprocal actions, increased levels of trust, and identification of common interests and values; all of which are essential elements of friendship (see Section 2.7.2) and which can take place before meeting in person.

McKenna et al. do not believe that relationships formed online are destined to remain online; there is often a desire to make them more ‘real’ by incorporating them into everyday life and introducing them into offline social circles of friends and family:

If ... people are motivated to make important new aspects of their identity a social reality, and if ... important relationships also become aspects of one’s identity, then people should be motivated to make their important new relationships a social reality,

that is, to bring them into their “real lives,” to make them public and face to face. (McKenna et al., 2002, p. 13)

Boase and Wellman (2004) state that “a relatively small minority of internet users actually use the internet to communicate with people that they do not already know from their everyday lives”, and that those relationships which do develop would subsequently be integrated into participants’ offline lives (p. 9). They acknowledge the Internet’s role as a venue for creating new relationships, although they feel that it is only relevant for a small proportion of users.

Amichai-Hamburger and Hayat predict that the process of building close relationships and self-confidence online, leading to face-to-face meetings, is “applicable to ... most people with social inhibitions”. They further argue that the social skills developed online will be useful in the face-to-face interaction, and perhaps also in bringing about the meeting in the first place by, for example, increasing self-confidence levels and the willingness to try to overcome discomfort (Amichai-Hamburger & Hayat, 2013, p. 15).

Fröding and Peterson, who do not believe that close, genuine friendships can be created online, nonetheless acknowledge that there can be “instrumental” benefits from interaction on online social networks. “For example, a social community site might indeed be a very good place to meet people with whom you could become the friend of [*sic*] at a later stage as you advance from interacting online to meeting in real life” (2012, p. 206): in other words, online interaction can serve as a stepping stone to a “traditional”, “morally valuable” friendship, which they believe can only be made offline.

The 2013 OxIS report, reporting on the online experience of UK Internet users, states that 59% of those who had met someone new online had gone on to meet in person, although there is no indication in the report as to whether these were casual meetings or an attempt to incorporate online friends into offline social groups (Dutton et al., 2013).

2.10 Summary

This chapter illustrates the wide range of research which has been undertaken during the past three decades into online social interaction, social capital and the Internet, and the

development and impact of friendships which are created online. These have all been popular topics throughout this period, and continue to be discussed within the literature.

While there is a wider acceptance in current research that online interaction can have a positive impact in participants' lives and can lead to friendship, there is a continuing argument regarding the depth and definition of these friendships. Similarly, there is a general consensus that social capital, both online and offline, can result from participation in online communities, although there continues to be debate about whether strong ties leading to bonding social capital can be developed; this is closely connected to the argument regarding close online friendships.

Although the above subjects are well represented in the literature, there has been considerably less research undertaken into the ways in which online friendships migrate or merge into participants' everyday, face-to-face social networks by, for example, meeting family members or long-standing offline friends and becoming part of those social circles. A drawback of much of the extant literature on online friendship, according to Amichai-Hamburger, Kingsbury and Schneider, is that it is "based on a highly oversimplified concept of what friendship is and means" (2013, p. 33). They suggest that this is because the majority of research into friendship and online communication has been quantitative, or at least conducted by questionnaire.

There is a dearth of qualitative, wide-ranging explorations of online friendships and their effect on participants' everyday lives, particularly in the UK, which is under-represented in research in this area. This study goes some way towards filling this gap.

Chapter Three

Methodology and Research Design

This chapter discusses the theoretical framework upon which the research was based, and the methods which were used to conduct the research.

When planning research, the research design, strategy and methodology must be considered in relation to the research questions, in order to select appropriate methods for the topic. Practical elements, such as time constraints, technology requirements and geographical limitations, should be considered at an early stage.

3.1 The Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research is to explore the value of online social networks by investigating the development of friendships online and the integration of those friendships into participants' offline, everyday lives. Research into online communities and the relationships created within them has been expanding over the past decade or so (Amichai-Hamburger & Hayat, 2013; Bane et al, 2010; Baym, 2000; d. boyd, 2006, 2008; Hampton, Goulet, Rainie & Purcell, 2011; Holland, 2008; Ploderer et al., 2008; Soraker, 2012). However, certain elements of the subject which are considered as part of this study, such as the migration of online friendships to offline social circles, appear to have been studied at less depth, particularly within the UK.

As outlined in Chapter One, the central research question of this thesis is: To what extent does regular online interaction affect participants' offline, everyday social networks?

The subjective nature of the data to be gathered within this research project, together with the challenges which arise from undertaking Internet-based research, meant that the methodology and research strategy had to be considered carefully and thoroughly before any data collection was undertaken.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

Establishing a theoretical framework at the outset of any research project is essential. This framework, or research paradigm, informs the research methods selected and the type of data collected during the research. The term ‘paradigm’ is probably the most commonly used when authors discuss the framework of how reality is observed through research, though different authors use different terminology, such as ‘worldview’ (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007) or ‘model’ (Silverman, 2000).

Epistemological and ontological paradigms provide a framework of how reality is observed. Epistemology is the theory of knowledge; it asks what is known, how it came to be known, and how we know what we know: ontology is the study of the nature of reality, and is part of the branch of philosophy known as metaphysics.

The qualitative and subjective focus of this research means that it falls outside the positivist paradigm, which obliges researchers to be objective and scientific. The study was conducted using a constructivist and interpretivist approach: the focus is on participants’ views and interpretations of their social world and how they “make sense of it based on their historical and social perspectives” (Creswell, 2009, p. 8).

3.3 Qualitative and Quantitative Research

One of the most frequently revisited arguments within social science research is that of the qualitative-quantitative dichotomy. As Blaxter, Hughes and Tight put it, “discussion about the relative merits of quantitative or qualitative approaches has at times become a veritable war zone” (2001, p. 60). Quantitative research is usually concerned with the collection and evaluation or analysis of numerical data, while qualitative research generally focuses on words and behaviour rather than counts or measures in its data collection and analysis. Thus “the two sorts of methods typically raise somewhat different questions at the level of data, on the way to generalizations about social life” (Becker, 1996, n.p.).

Bryman suggests that qualitative and quantitative research “can be taken to form two distinctive clusters of research strategy” (2012, p. 35), where the different aspects of research and theory, epistemology and ontology are considered. He states that a quantitative research strategy leans more towards a positivist framework, based around a deductive

approach with a concentration on the testing of theories and an objectivist position. In contrast, qualitative research is inductive, with theories arising as an outcome of the research, with an interpretive epistemology and a constructionist ontology.

These are, as Bryman acknowledges, very basic comparisons of the two research strategies, and while “each carries with it striking differences in terms of the role of theory, epistemological issues, and ontological concerns ... the distinction is not a hard-and-fast one” (2012, p. 37).

3.3.1 Differences between qualitative and quantitative research

The type of data is not the only difference between qualitative and quantitative “research strategies”, as Bryman calls them. Other writers use terms such as “research methods” (Becker, 1996), “research approaches” (Blaxter, Hughes, & Tight, 2001; Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007), or “methodologies” (Denscombe, 2008) to describe these two types of research.

Creswell and Plano Clark state that quantitative data is usually “closed-ended information such as that found on attitude, behaviour, or performance instruments” and that qualitative data is “open-ended information that the researcher gathers through interviews with participants” or by other methods such as observation. “The open- versus closed-ended nature of the data differentiates between the two types better than the sources of the data” (2007, p. 6).

It is important to note that qualitative and quantitative research both involve the same steps within the research process. The difference between the two approaches is in the methods used and perhaps also in the aim of each step. For example, the step of data collection: qualitative researchers collect words and/or images from a small number of participants, and usually study those participants at their location, face-to-face; quantitative researchers collect numerical data from a large number of participants, and the data collection instruments can be administered remotely.

Additionally, as Creswell and Plano Clark note, the “role of the researcher differs in qualitative and quantitative approaches” (p. 31): in qualitative research the researcher is an integral part of the data collection and analysis process, acknowledging their own

potentially influential experience and recording any biases by continual reflection. In quantitative research the researcher does everything possible to remove bias and to remain in the background of the research process.

One argument with regard to the differences between qualitative and quantitative research strategies is that the different research methods are fixed within specific and conflicting epistemological and ontological considerations and positions. Another argument, broadly similar to this, is that qualitative and quantitative research strategies themselves are paradigms, different and incompatible with each other and consisting of their own specific epistemologies, values and methods.

Julia Brannen acknowledges the argument regarding the paradigmatic differences between qualitative and quantitative research, and states that these differences are likely to continue “since, on the one hand, qualitative approaches embrace even greater reflexivity, and on the other hand, quantitative research adopts ever more complex statistical techniques” (2007, p. 282). She believes that “qualitative and quantitative data need to be treated as broadly *complementary*, though not necessarily as compatible” (p. 283).

Yvonna Lincoln wrote an article in 2010 evaluating 25 years of the changes in qualitative research and the “new paradigms” which have developed in that time. She seems to be of the opinion that it is still very much an ‘us and them’ situation, with qualitative and quantitative researchers failing to understand and appreciate the importance and validity of the others’ methods.

3.3.2 Similarities between qualitative and quantitative research

Though many of the authors consulted for this research mention divisions and debates between quantitative and qualitative researchers, most seem to accept that “many of the apparent differences between quantitative and qualitative research should disappear” (Silverman, 2000, p. 5).

Bryman writes that “there would seem to be little to the quantitative/qualitative distinction other than the fact that quantitative researchers employ measurement and qualitative researchers do not” (2012, p. 35). He further notes that, though there are

many differences between quantitative and qualitative research – though not such rigid distinctions as is often assumed – there are also many similarities. Both types of research strategy:

- involve the reduction of data;
- answer research questions;
- relate data analysis to the research literature;
- aim to prevent distortion of results;
- emphasise the importance of transparency; and
- seek to ensure that the research methods used are appropriate for the research aims and questions (pp. 409-410).

Creswell suggests that qualitative and quantitative research approaches should not be viewed as direct opposites, but rather as opposite ends of a continuum. In the middle of this continuum sits mixed methods research, which “incorporates elements of both qualitative and quantitative approaches” (2009, p. 3).

3.3.3 Evaluating the quality of social research

Evaluation of research, whether qualitative or quantitative, is vital in order to ensure the value and integrity of the research. Three primary criteria for evaluating social research are reliability, validity and replicability. Reliability relates to whether or not the results of a study can be repeated, and whether the measures used in research are stable and consistent. Validity is “concerned with the integrity of the conclusions that are generated from a piece of research” (Bryman, 2012, p. 47); there are several different types, including internal validity (confidence in a causal relationship, only relevant to the specific study), external validity (the ability to generalise the results beyond the specific study) and measurement or construct validity (whether a test measures what it purports to measure). Replicability describes the ability of a research study to be duplicated by another researcher, and thus the procedures and methods used must be clearly described within the research write-up. Bryman notes that “replication in social research is not common. In fact, it is probably truer to say that it is quite rare” (2012, p. 47).

The three evaluation criteria described above are commonly considered to be primarily relevant to quantitative research: “The professional community in which

quantitative work is done ... insists on asking questions about reliability and validity, and makes acceptable answers to those questions the touchstone of good work” (Becker, 1996, n.p.). However, the lack of measures, quantifiable results and generalisable cause and effect within the majority of qualitative research means that these criteria cannot easily be applied to research which is not predominantly quantitative in emphasis.

3.3.4 Reliability and validity in qualitative research

Bryman notes that some authors “argue that the grounding of these ideas [of reliability and validity] in quantitative research renders them inapplicable to or inappropriate for qualitative research” (2012, p. 48). Creswell does use the terms validity and reliability with regard to qualitative research, however: he states that “qualitative validity” relates to the use of certain procedures to ensure accuracy of findings, and that “qualitative reliability” means that the approach is the same when conducted by different researchers in different projects (2009, p. 190).

Bryman discusses Lincoln and Guba’s 1985 proposal (also in Guba and Lincoln, 1994) that qualitative research should be assessed by the criterion of trustworthiness. Aspects of this criterion parallel to the traditionally quantitative research criteria: credibility (internal validity); transferability (external validity); dependability (reliability); and confirmability (objectivity). Bryman states that Lincoln and Guba were uncomfortable with the application of reliability and validity to qualitative research because “the criteria presuppose that a single absolute account of social reality is feasible” (2012, p. 390).

Methods which could be used to establish credibility include ensuring adherence to good practice in conducting the research, triangulation and respondent validation. Since qualitative research tends to be contextually positioned in the group or situation being studied, whether results are the same in another place or at another time would be difficult to prove; therefore, a researcher can aid the transferability of research by providing rich and detailed descriptions of the population, the situation, and the research process.

The concept of dependability as a parallel evaluation criterion to reliability can be assessed by an audit of the research process, necessitating the researcher to keep detailed records of the research process which can be assessed, or audited, by peers. Bryman notes that this is not a popular approach, primarily because of the demands placed on the auditors. Confirmability concerns researchers demonstrating that, as far as is possible within social research, they have been objective and have not allowed personal feelings or bias to affect the research or its results. “Lincoln and Guba propose that establishing confirmability should be one of the objectives of auditors” (Bryman, 2012, p. 393); however, as noted above, this is not necessarily a popular approach, nor may it be possible for the lone or student researcher.

Both dependability and confirmability can be evidenced by the use of respondent validation (also known as ‘member checking’), presentation of results that are counter to the themes, the use of rich, thick description and reflective writing as part of the research process: “Reflectivity has been mentioned as a core characteristic of qualitative research” (Creswell, 2009, p. 192).

3.4 Mixed methods research

By definition, mixed methods is a procedure for collecting, analyzing, and “mixing” or integrating both quantitative and qualitative data at some stage of the research process within a single study for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of the research problem. (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006, p. 3)

The historical view that research strategies cannot be combined in one study is still taken by some scholars; however, mixed methods research is becoming more and more common, particularly in health and social sciences (Denscombe, 2008; Ivankova et al., 2006). Despite this, it is not necessarily a new research approach. Martyn Denscombe writes that there have been examples of the combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods since long before the accepted emergence of mixed methods research in the 1990s: “... there is evidence to suggest that for a long time the use of mixed methods has been going on in the background without being celebrated or heralded as part of a new paradigm” (2008, p. 274).

Denscombe writes that “the mixed methods approach can be seen as offering a third paradigm for social research through the way it combines quantitative and qualitative

methodologies on the basis of pragmatism and a practice-driven need to mix methods” (2008, p. 280). He believes that mixed methods research should have its own unique and flexible research paradigm, or “philosophical underpinning” (p. 275), in order to “accommodate the variety of ways in which mixed methods are used and the variety of motives researchers might have for adopting a mixed methods approach” (p. 278).

The motives for adopting a mixed methods design are based on the fact that a complete picture of a particular phenomenon or set of circumstances cannot be fully obtained by either qualitative or quantitative research methods alone. “When used in combination, quantitative and qualitative methods complement each other and allow for a more robust analysis, taking advantage of the strengths of each” (Ivankova et al., 2006, p. 3). Bryman (2012, pp. 633-634) writes extensively on a research project he undertook to examine the use of mixed methods research in published journal articles. As a result of this research, he produced a list of 18 rationales (including ‘other/unclear’ and ‘not stated’) for combining qualitative and quantitative research. The rationales identified included triangulation, completeness, sampling, enhancement and instrument development.

The choice of mixed methods research design is perhaps not as straightforward as it might at first appear. “There are about forty mixed-methods research designs reported in the literature (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003). Creswell et al. (2003) identified the six most often used designs, which include three concurrent and three sequential designs” (Ivankova et al., 2006, p. 4). Creswell and Plano Clark suggest that there are three decisions which must be made before choosing a research design: the timing of the research (when data is collected and the order of the collection); the weighting of the two approaches; and the mixing of the approaches (how the types of data are combined or connected to each other) (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, pp. 83-84).

Brannen cites Hammersley (1996) who describes three definitions of combined qualitative and quantitative research data, in the process of interpretation: triangulation (using one type of data to corroborate another); facilitation (where collecting one type of data facilitates the collection of another type); and complementarity (where different sets of data are used for different elements of a study) (Brannen, 2007, p. 284).

The decision regarding the timing of the research, i.e. when and in what order the different types of data are collected, has to be made at the earliest stage of the research process. There are two options: concurrent or sequential. In a concurrent mixed methods design, qualitative and quantitative methods are used at the same time; in a sequential mixed methods design, “the researcher seeks to elaborate on or expand on the findings of one method with another method” (Creswell, 2009, p. 14).

This research has used a sequential explanatory design, in which the first phase of research involved the collection and analysis of quantitative data, followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data, building on the initial results. More detail about this mixed methods research design is given in Section 3.5.1 below.

As can be surmised from Section 3.3.1 above, the view that qualitative and quantitative research strategies have separate epistemological and ontological viewpoints which should not overlap is one which has been much discussed within research literature. This subject is also one of the main criticisms of mixed methods research: “Methodological purists believe strongly in the dichotomy of world views and research methods ... and therefore argue against the combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches” (Doyle, Brady, & Byrne, 2009, p. 183). Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003, cited by Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 26) suggest that pragmatism is the generally accepted and most appropriate paradigm within which to place mixed methods research.

A pragmatic paradigm focuses on “the consequences of research, on the primary importance of the question asked rather than the methods, and multiple methods of data collection inform the problems under study. Thus it is pluralistic and oriented toward “what works” and practice” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 23). Creswell and Plano Clark subsequently discuss various viewpoints with regard to research paradigms within mixed methods research: that there is a single “best” paradigm for mixed methods research; that multiple paradigms may be used as long as clear explanations are given for their use; and that the mixed methods research design will determine the paradigm used (p. 27).

Though Creswell and Plano Clark write that they would generally consider pragmatism to be the best philosophical position within which to conduct mixed methods research, they acknowledge that this may not be the case for all mixed methods researchers, or for all

mixed methods research projects. Where a mixed methods research design has a significant emphasis on either quantitative or qualitative data, the researcher should consider the appropriate research paradigm to be used. Since this study has a strong qualitative emphasis, it has been conducted within a constructivist paradigm.

3.4.1 Evaluating mixed methods research

Mixed methods research can present challenges when it comes to assessing its value: “the very act of combining qualitative and quantitative approaches raises additional potential validity issues” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 145). Creswell and Plano Clark use the term ‘validity’ rather than integrity or credibility when they write about the evaluation of mixed methods research. They note that, while it is possible to use the methods usually associated with qualitative and quantitative research, “a need exists to assess validity in terms of the overall design” (2007, p. 149).

Creswell and Plano Clark recommend a variety of ways to establish or address the issue of validity in mixed methods research. These include:

- addressing validity within each approach on its own terms;
- using the term ‘validity’ rather than an alternative term (though they also use “inference quality”, as used by Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003, cited by Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 146));
- defining validity within mixed methods research as “the ability of the researcher to draw meaningful and accurate conclusions from all of the data in the study.” (p. 146);
- discussing validity from the standpoint of the mixed methods design chosen. In the case of an Explanatory design, as selected for this research project, “more meaningful information results when the qualitative second phase builds on significant predictors rather than on simple group comparisons” (p. 146);
- discussing potential threats to validity which arise during data collection and analysis (pp. 146-147).

3.5 Research Methods

The methods chosen for undertaking this research were selected for their usefulness in meeting the research aim and objectives. Since the central research question aims to

discover how online friendships impact on the offline, everyday social networks of those involved, there is a significant qualitative bias to the research, and it has been conducted using an interpretivist, constructivist approach.

The decision to use a mixed methods research design was made for three key reasons: to facilitate sampling, to offset the weaknesses and exploit the strengths of the individual approaches, and to achieve a more complete understanding of the research subject. The primary, quantitative phase of data collection and analysis led to the identification and selection of participants in the secondary, qualitative phase of the research. This is discussed in further detail in Section 3.5.1 below. The potential weaknesses of the two research approaches, such as a lack of detail in quantitative questionnaire responses, and the limited sample size when conducting in-person interviews, can be reduced by a combination of the two research strategies. Equally, combining the strengths of the approaches (large-scale data collection of a variety of quantitative information, and an in-depth qualitative awareness of participants' experiences and feelings) leads to detailed, rich and thick description, providing a more complete understanding of the area of inquiry.

The methods employed were therefore selected in order to appropriately meet the research objectives. A literature survey was carried out to review previous research and to identify any gaps; details of this were given in Chapter Two. Data collection was accomplished by means of an online questionnaire, followed by face-to-face interviews.

3.5.1 Sequential Explanatory design

As noted in Section 3.4 above, Creswell et al. (2003) identified six frequently-used mixed methods research designs. One of these is the Sequential Explanatory design.

The rationale for this approach is that the quantitative data and their subsequent analysis provide a general understanding of the research problem. The qualitative data and their analysis refine and explain those statistical results by exploring participants' views in more depth. (Ivankova et al., 2006, p. 5)

Creswell and Plano Clark describe two variants of the Explanatory design, one of which is used in this research: the participant selection model. This model is “used when a researcher needs quantitative information to identify and purposefully select participants for a follow-up, in-depth, qualitative study. In this model, the emphasis of the study is usually on the second, qualitative phase” (2007, p. 74).

Figure 1 shows the participant selection model as described by Creswell and Plano Clark. Figure 2 translates this into the process used for this research.

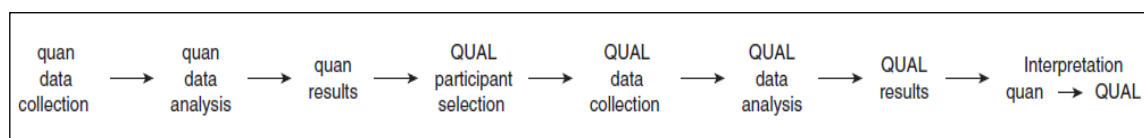


Figure 1 : Sequential Explanatory design – participant selection model
(Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 73)

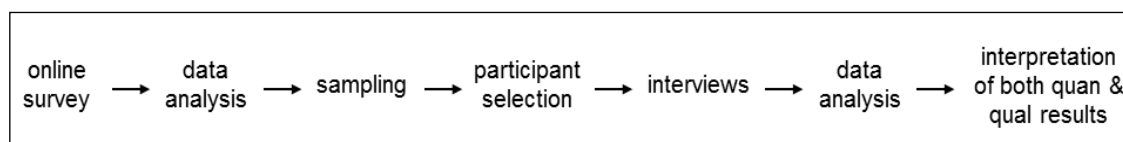


Figure 2 : Participant selection model as applied to this research

Though the Sequential Explanatory design is described by Creswell and Plano Clark as a two-phase design (a quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase), it is also described as having three stages. Stage 1 is the analysis of the initial, quantitative data; during Stage 2 the researcher decides on the information which is useful for the transition from Stage 2 to Stage 3; and Stage 3 is the collection and analysis of the second, qualitative set of data. Creswell and Plano Clark note that it is important to carefully select which results from the quantitative analysis are to be followed up in the qualitative stage: they suggest using outliers, extreme cases, particularly significant or non-significant results, selecting from specific demographic groups, and using comparison groups. This list is of course not exhaustive; every study has different requirements.

A visual model of the sequential explanatory design used in this research, based on Ivankova et al. (2006, p. 16), is available in Appendix A.

3.5.2 Data collection

The selection of data collection methods was made as a result of the choice of research design and in order to best meet the research objectives. The use of the participant selection model of the Sequential Explanatory design required the collection of a reasonably large quantitative data set from which to select the qualitative research participants. “The intent of [this design] is to use qualitative data to provide more detail about the quantitative results and to select participants that can

best provide this detail” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 122). There is no issue with regard to unequal sample sizes within this research design.

The first phase of the data collection, the quantitative questionnaire, was conducted using web-based survey software; the second phase, qualitative interviewing, was done face-to-face.

3.5.2.1 Online questionnaire

It was decided to use a web-based questionnaire for the primary phase of the data collection for several reasons. Considering the research topic, it seemed logical to collect the quantitative data via the Internet, and by doing so the likelihood of acquiring a wide-ranging and diverse pool of respondents was increased. Additionally, a link to a website is more easily distributed and shared online than a questionnaire attached to an email.

Previous use of an online questionnaire for data collection had resulted in a fairly high response rate in a short period of time, and a large data set was desired in order to analyse the essential elements of the research (for example, whether respondents believed that they had made friends online and whether they had met those friends face-to-face).

SurveyGizmo.com was selected as the hosting site due to previous favourable experience. At the time of use, the site provided a free Student Edition of its high-level Enterprise Plan, normally priced at \$159 per month (as at July 2011), which delivered advanced functionality, question types and reports.

Since the data instrument was a self-completion questionnaire (also known as a ‘self-administered questionnaire’), its design had to be considered carefully. Bryman states that self-completion questionnaires need to have certain characteristics to encourage respondents to complete them, including: the inclusion of more closed questions, since they tend to be easier to answer than open ones; simpler designs to avoid problems with the omission of questions; and a shorter questionnaire to try to avoid ‘respondent fatigue’, boredom or frustration (2012, p. 233).

A copy of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix B. This file was downloaded from the SurveyGizmo site and has minimal formatting; the questionnaire itself had a simple design, which can be seen in Appendices C and G.

There are a number of advantages to using a self-completion questionnaire, such as: the low cost; the speed of completion; lack of interviewer effects or influence; and convenience for the respondents. However, there are also disadvantages, including: the lack of opportunity for respondents to ask for help or for the researcher to guide or probe for more detail; not being able to ask many open questions; no opportunity for collecting observational data; not knowing who is answering the questions; and the need to keep the questionnaire short and relatively interesting.

There are additional concerns to be borne in mind with regard to the use of an online questionnaire: “There is a feeling among some commentators that when a self-completion questionnaire is administered over the Internet ... the problem of not knowing who is replying is exacerbated because of the propensity of some Web users to assume online identities” (Bryman, 2012, pp. 234-235). Moreover, there is a possibility of multiple replies – an individual completing a questionnaire more than once. While no geographical or ISP information was collected by the SurveyGizmo website, cookies⁶ were used in an attempt to prevent duplicates (this would have been ineffective for respondents whose computers did not accept cookies, or who deleted their browser history or cookies regularly). The anonymity and lack of personal interaction inherent in an online questionnaire may result in a lower level of commitment from respondents; it is all too easy for an online questionnaire respondent to navigate away from the site before answering all of the questions, or to give little or no thought to their answers, thus potentially skewing the results.

6 Cookies are small files which are downloaded from websites to a user's computer. They contain data related to the website and to the specific computer, and can be accessed either by the website or the client computer. The website can then show pages which are relevant to the user, or the page itself may contain script which reads the data in the cookie and can carry information from one website visit to the next (“What are Cookies?”, 2012, n.p.).

Bryman discusses research by Crawford et al. (2001, cited by Bryman, 2012, p. 675), which explored possible influences on response rates for web surveys. They found that people were more likely to click through to a survey which stated that it would take a fairly short length of time to complete, and that people were more likely to stop completing the questionnaire in the middle of a series of open questions. They also discovered that a progress meter seemed to reduce the number of uncompleted questionnaires, and that respondents seemed to prefer questions grouped together on a screen when they were on the same theme. The questionnaire was therefore designed to look as clean and uncluttered as possible, with each page containing questions which were on a theme or which led on from one to another in a logical way. Appendix C shows a screenshot of page 4 of the questionnaire, which asked questions regarding online friendships and their transfer into everyday life.

The questionnaire was piloted to a small number of people who were varied in their ages, backgrounds and level of experience in online social networks. No significant changes were made as a result of the pilot, though some explanatory notes and emphases were added to improve the clarity of two questions. The design appears to have been successful because, of 464 total responses, 433 questionnaires were fully completed.

3.5.2.2 Interviews

“The interview is probably the most widely employed method in qualitative research” (Bryman, 2012, p. 469). The pursuit of understanding, whether of an individual’s behaviour, a social phenomenon, or the social norms of a group or organisation, necessitates flexible and in-depth data collection, for which interviewing is ideally suited.

There are three main types of qualitative research interview: structured, semi-structured and unstructured. Structured interviews are often associated with quantitative data collection, since the questions and their order are fixed and standardised, ensuring consistency from the interviews and allowing direct comparison between answers. Nonetheless, it is not unheard of for structured interviews to be used for qualitative data collection, for example in studies

which compare participant responses, though they are by definition significantly less flexible than the other types of interview.

A semi-structured interview has a framework of themes around which the interview is organised, and which should be thoroughly planned and prepared in advance. If the interviewee moves the discussion in a new or unexpected direction, the interviewer may choose to follow in that direction, or to refocus on the interview guide. The relationship between the interviewer and interviewee could be described as fairly equal.

The researcher has a list of questions or fairly specific topics to be covered, often referred to as an interview guide, but the interviewee has a great deal of leeway in how to reply. Questions may not follow on exactly in the way outlined on the schedule. Questions that are not included in the guide may be asked as the interviewer picks up on things said by interviewees. But, by and large, all the questions will be asked and a similar wording will be used from interviewee to interviewee. (Bryman, 2012, p. 471)

In an unstructured interview, the interviewer “typically has only a list of topics or issues, often called an interview guide or *aide-mémoire*, that are to be covered. The style of questioning is usually informal. The phrasing and sequencing of questions will vary from interview to interview” (Bryman, 2012, p. 213). Unstructured interviews are very like a conversation, with the interviewee having as much, or perhaps more, control over the content of the discussion as the interviewer. However, the lack of a structure or framework with which to focus or guide the interview may mean that this type of interview is more prone to interviewer effects: “characteristics of interviewers (and respondents) may affect the answers that people give ... it has been suggested that characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, and the social background of interviewers may combine to bias the answers that respondents provide” (Bryman, 2012, p. 233).

Semi-structured interviewing was deemed to be the most appropriate method for this research, due to the fact that specific themes and areas of interest were identified in advance as part of the quantitative data analysis and interview participant selection. Although it was not appropriate to ask each participant exactly the same set of questions, a basic guide was used for each interview to

which supplementary questions were added, relevant to the individual participant, based upon their responses to the online questionnaire. A comprehensive interview guide can be seen in Appendix D.

It was decided to conduct all of the interviews in person. Although there are many alternatives to face-to-face interviews, such as using the telephone, email, instant messaging or an Internet calling service such as Skype, in-person interviews have a number of advantages over these options. The familiar, conversational nature of a face-to-face interview feels more comfortable and natural to the interviewee than one conducted via mediating technology, and “if the interviewee feels comfortable, they will find it easier to talk to you” (Rapley, 2007, p. 19). A face-to-face situation may also encourage more detailed answers from the interviewee, and more volunteering of information, as the discussion is mutual and interactive. Perhaps most importantly, the visual cues and body language of the interviewee can help the interviewer to guide the discussion towards, or away from, particular topics.

An important concern with regard to conducting face-to-face interviews is that of interviewer safety. While the potential for risk was acknowledged and considered carefully as part of the research planning process, the potential value of the data which could be collected from qualitative, face-to-face interviews was believed to be too great to reject this method. This is discussed in more detail in Section 3.7.2.

The majority of interviews were conducted in a public place such as a coffee shop or pub, although some did take place in the participants’ homes. In most of these cases, the interviewee was known to the researcher, either directly or indirectly (a friend or relative of a friend). However, two interviewees (Andrew and Isla) were unwilling or unable to be interviewed unless it took place in their home; both are self-employed and provided sufficient information to prove their identities. Standard precautions were taken with regard to interviewer safety: details of the interview location and approximate timings were left with a third party, who was contacted once the interview was concluded.

The interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder and were transcribed as soon as possible after the interview took place. Making a recording of an interview enables accurate, verbatim transcription, and also frees the interviewer from the need to make lengthy notes, enabling them to concentrate on guiding the interview and, more importantly, listening to the interviewee. There is the potential for problems to arise as a result of recording interviews: interviewees may feel inhibited, there may be background noise which affects the quality of the recording, or the recorder may break down or run out of battery. Additionally, “the transcription of interviews ... and the analysis of transcripts are all very time-consuming” (Bryman, 2012, p. 469). Nonetheless, it was felt that the advantages of a verbatim transcript of an interview outweighed these disadvantages.

3.5.3 Data analysis

“Analysis is the act of giving meaning to data” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 64). Within mixed methods research, there are a number of challenges to the researcher, one of which is the need to understand both quantitative and qualitative research methods, and another is the necessity of analysing both types of data, which can be significantly more time consuming than the analysis of data resulting from a single research strategy. While the focus, or weighting, of this research is qualitative, the quantitative data collected from the online questionnaire are just as essential to the final results and conclusions.

3.5.3.1 Quantitative data analysis

The process of quantitative data analysis is particularly important within a sequential mixed methods research design, since it forms Stage 1 of the design and is integral to the selection of participants during Stage 2.

The majority of the data collected by the online questionnaire were quantitative, though of the fifteen questions asked, four were open. Of these, one asked for the respondent’s country of residence, and one asked for the names of any online social networking sites to which the respondent belonged. The data provided by these questions were cleaned and standardised in order to facilitate analysis. The third open question asked where the respondent had seen the

survey invitation. The fourth open question (Question 12) asked respondents who stated that an online friend had become a regular part of their everyday life for more information about their experience: the length of answers to this question varied from 7 words to 439 words. Responses to Question 12 were broadly analysed using thematic coding, and were used as prompts for discussion during the interview phase of the research.

The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), version 20, a statistical analysis software package produced by IBM. This software is widely used within the social sciences, and includes the capability for descriptive statistics, bivariate and multivariate statistics and predictive statistics. The SurveyGizmo website provides a variety of basic reporting functions, and also allows the export of survey data into CSV (comma-separated values) format for use in Microsoft Excel or other spreadsheet applications, and into SPSS format.

3.5.3.2 Qualitative data analysis

Two primary methods of data analysis were used on the qualitative data gathered from interviews: transcription and coding. Though Bryman states that, “unlike quantitative data analysis, clear-cut rules about how qualitative data analysis should be carried out have not been developed” (2012, p. 565), the methodological literature contains many guides to the transcription of interviews and the coding of texts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Flick, 2006; Olson, 2011; Poland, 2001; Rapley, 2007).

‘Intelligent verbatim’ transcripts were produced from the digital interview recordings. The three most common transcription formats are verbatim, intelligent verbatim and edited. Verbatim transcripts include every “um”, “er” and “you know”, as well as noting coughs, indicating the length of pauses and so on. An intelligent verbatim transcript excludes these ‘filler’ words and sounds but retains everything else as spoken; it may therefore include some “you know”s, as well as changes of direction or topic in the middle of a sentence. An edited transcript tidies up the speech patterns of those involved in the interview, corrects grammar and generally seeks to improve the flow of the

language used. Since this study did not involve detailed conversation or discourse analysis, verbatim transcription was not required; nor would edited transcription be appropriate, since it can often be the case that slang, repeated words, changes in direction or phrases such as “you know” can be indicative of a participant’s true feelings about a subject. A transcription guide was created and can be found in Appendix E.

There are some criticisms of coding as an approach to qualitative data analysis, such as the loss of context of what has been said: removing the surrounding text or context from an extract of an interview can result in the loss of understanding of the whole picture. Another criticism is that coding results in the fragmentation of data, thereby losing the flow of what was said and how it was said. It is true that it can be easy, when faced with the large amount of data created by qualitative research, to be distracted by the richness and breadth of the data. There can be a danger of “failing to carry out a true analysis” (Bryman, 2012, p. 565) and of being unable to provide a wider significance to the research.

Interviews were transcribed as soon as possible after they were conducted. As a sole researcher, the transcription process was time consuming, but it facilitated a greater familiarity with and understanding of the content of the interviews. A thematic, interpretive coding strategy was developed and was further refined as more interviews were conducted and analysed.

3.5.3.3 Coding the transcripts

Coding “entails reviewing transcripts and/or field notes and giving labels (names) to component parts that seem to be of potential theoretical significance and/or that appear to be particularly salient within the social worlds of those being studied” (Bryman, 2012, p. 568). The process of coding text or texts is a central element of qualitative data analysis.

Flick discusses the importance of text in qualitative research and its relation to the reality or realities being studied. Interviews are transcribed into texts, and field notes and research diaries may also be used as part of the data: “text [is]

the result of the data collection and ... the instrument for interpretation” (2006, p. 83).

Qualitative coding entails creating codes as the data is studied, grouping together different phrases or anecdotes which are similar in theme into categories. This can be described as thematic analysis though, as Bryman notes, despite widespread use of thematic analysis in social science research, it is not a readily identifiable approach; it has no specific heritage. He writes that “the search for themes is an activity that can be discerned in many if not most approaches to qualitative data analysis” (2012, p. 578).

The coding of the interview transcripts was undertaken in NVivo 10, a type of qualitative research software known as CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software). Documents and audio files can be imported into NVivo, where they can be analysed: codes can be created, personal notes or memos written and linked to the original source files, and connections between files can be identified and recorded.

A total of 33 *a priori* codes were developed before beginning the process of analysing the interview transcripts. These codes were based on the research objectives and the comprehensive interview guide. For example, objective 1 – “To discover whether participants in online social networks perceive fellow members to be their friends” – suggested the codes ‘Made friends online’, ‘No online friend’, and ‘Online friendship’, while objective 3 – “To discover whether participants in online social networks evaluate the friendships developed online differently to those they developed offline” – suggested ‘Online vs. offline friends’, ‘Types of people’, and ‘Expectations of friendship’. The interview guide suggested the majority of the *a priori* codes, including ‘Benefits of meeting’, ‘Definition of friendship’, ‘Easier online’, ‘How (online friend was) made’, and ‘Different OSNs (make it easier to make friends)’. Additional codes were created for the various online social networks to which interviewees belonged. The *a priori* codes are shown in Appendix O.

In addition to the *a priori* codes, further inductive codes were identified during the process of examining and analysing the interview data. Since each of the interviews was different in focus and scope, based upon the interviewee's questionnaire responses, it was not possible to create a complete coding scheme in advance. Detailed analysis of the transcripts resulted in the identification of a significant number of new themes, many of which were divided into sub-themes. The *a priori* codes were further developed and expanded throughout the qualitative analysis process: for example, 'Definition of friend' was divided into 25 sub-themes, including 'Equality', 'Trust', and 'Being yourself'. At the end of the qualitative data analysis there were 47 top-level codes, or themes, which were divided into a total of 162 codes.

The new themes identified included 'Gaming' (divided into 'Friending to play', 'Gaming for maintenance', 'New friends' and 'Socialising as character') which is discussed in Sections 6.6.3 and 7.6.4, and 'Deceit', which incorporated discussion of 'Online identity' (see Section 6.3). A full list of the final codes (exported from NVivo) is in Appendix P.

3.5.4 Online research

"Internet research is difficult. That is obvious" (Jones, 1999, p. xiii).

Many of the issues which can arise as a result of using an online questionnaire to collect data were discussed in Section 3.5.2.1 above. As a type of research which is still relatively new, online research is the subject of considerable discussion within the literature, both with regard to its methodology and to the potential differences in terms of its ethical implications.

One concern with regard to social science research conducted on the Internet is that, as more and more is done, there is more likelihood of poor levels of response as a result of "respondent fatigue" in "over-researched populations" (Bryman, 2012, p. 679); additionally, potential participants are often aware of ethical principles and the fact that some researchers are not adhering to them. (A good example of this is the 2009 'SurveyFail' incident on LiveJournal (MacLeod, 2009; "SurveyFail", 2011).) "As a result, fatigue and suspicion are beginning to set in among prospective research

participants, creating a less than ideal environment for future Internet researchers” (Bryman, 2012, p. 679). This was not deemed to be a significant risk with regard to this research, since those communities which were approached were not considered to be in the category of “over-researched populations”.

There are, of course, significant sampling problems when conducting online research. Not everyone in the world is online, nor is everyone in any one nation or community; many people have several email addresses and sometimes more than one ISP; computer accounts may be shared by several people; and it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to acquire sampling frames of those who are online. Additionally, though the ‘digital divide’⁷ may be narrowing in many Western countries, there is still (or is still a perception of) a bias towards better-educated, wealthier and younger individuals as members of most online populations.

Bryman notes the issues with the generalisability of online research data, but adds that, “given that we have so little knowledge and understanding of online behaviour and attitudes relating to online issues, it could reasonably be argued that some information about these areas is a lot better than none at all” (2012, p. 674).

3.6 Selection of Research Participants

Research participants were selected by the use of various types of sampling. “Sampling is crucial for later analysis. As much as you might want to, you cannot study everyone everywhere doing everything” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 27). The initial selection of questionnaire respondents was accomplished by convenience sampling, followed by snowball sampling. Following quantitative data analysis, interview participants were chosen by purposive sampling.

3.6.1 Questionnaire respondents

Invitations to participate in the online questionnaire were posted in a variety of online locations and in a variety of ways. These included:

⁷ ‘Digital divide’ is a term used to describe the gap which exists between people who have access to, or knowledge of, information and communication technologies and those who have not.

- a) Messages posted on Twitter by several individuals;
- b) A message posted on Twitter by the LIS Research Coalition (followed by information professionals and researchers);
- c) Facebook messages posted by several individuals;
- d) Emails sent by several individuals to their friends and family;
- e) Message posted on the members' forum of a weight-loss website;
- f) Messages posted to three email-based mailing lists, established around common interests (embroidery, a television show and recycling);
- g) Messages posted on individuals' blogs, hosted on LiveJournal and Dreamwidth;
- h) A message posted on Flickr; and
- i) Messages posted to a variety of other bulletin boards, forums and private mailing lists.

All of these people and locations were chosen by convenience sampling: "A convenience sample is one that is simply available to the researcher by virtue of its accessibility" (Bryman, 2012, p. 201). Convenience sampling, also known as accidental or opportunity sampling, is a non-probability sampling method. Probability sampling results in a representative sample; all members of a population have a known chance of being selected. Non-probability sampling is conducted without using random sampling methods, and therefore it is difficult, if not impossible, to know whether or not the population is represented.

There are negative implications for this study as a result of the use of non-probability sampling. As noted in Section 3.5.4 above, the research participants are not representative of the online population as a whole, nor of the communities to which they belong: as a consequence, the results of the research cannot be generalised to the wider population. Furthermore, the use of convenience sampling resulted in a very high ratio of female to male questionnaire respondents. Despite these implications, the study could easily be replicated, using the same or different online groups, thus meeting Creswell's definition of "qualitative reliability" (2009, p. 190). These implications, while they are acknowledged, are not of major significance for the study; no model is to be created as a result of this research, and the issue of validity within the mixed methods research design is addressed using Creswell and Plano Clark's suggested techniques, as outlined in Section 3.4.1.

As noted above, the lack of representativeness and generalisability is a significant concern in online research, as is the widespread use of “volunteer participants” (Hewson, Yule, Laurent & Vogel, 2003, p. 36). Hewson et al. write that “volunteers have been found to differ from non-volunteers on personality variables” (p. 38) and that it is difficult to get an idea of the sampling frame: “... how many people saw the announcement? What types of people saw the announcement?” (p. 38). While these concerns were borne in mind during the research process, the time and geographical limitations meant that the use of volunteer participants was considered to be the most appropriate for this study.

The various individuals who distributed links to the questionnaire were friends and acquaintances who had agreed in advance to complete the questionnaire and then to pass it on to others. The LIS Research Coalition was contacted directly and asked to post a message about the research, and the Twitter message was then re-tweeted by several of the Coalition’s followers. The weight-loss website (Weight Loss Resources) and the email lists (UK Cross Stitch, Sentinel UK and Aberystwyth-Ceredigion-Freecycle) were chosen due to the researcher’s membership of them. Two of the email lists had previously been used as sample groups for an undergraduate dissertation.

Preliminary messages asking for permission to post the questionnaire link were sent to the moderators of the mailing lists and to the ‘Help Team’ of Weight Loss Resources (WLR). This was granted without exception. Appendix F gives examples of an initial approach message (to WLR) and of two invitations to participate in the research. All of the invitations to participate included a comment encouraging recipients to share the link with other people, as did the closing page of the questionnaire.

The purpose of asking respondents to share details of the questionnaire was to encourage snowball sampling. In this sampling method, “the researcher makes initial contact with a small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then uses these to establish contacts with others” (Bryman, 2012, p. 202). Bryman writes that snowball sampling may be the only possible approach in research where there is “no accessible sampling frame for the population from which the sample is to be taken” and where creating a sampling frame would be difficult, if not impossible (p.

203). It is difficult to know exactly how successful the snowballing was in some cases, such as the WLR site or the email lists, but in the case of individuals who were sent an invitation and who then passed it on to their friends or colleagues, the results ranged from two to 43 responses. These results are discussed further in Chapter Five.

A rough timeline of the distribution of the questionnaire is given below.

Date	Actions taken and number of responses received
17 June 2011	First invitation messages sent. End of day: 60 responses
23 June	254 responses
27 June	298 responses
28 June	Additional messages posted on Flickr and Facebook
12 July	329 responses (only 49 from men – 14.9%). Messages sent out via Twitter, Facebook and email asking for more responses, particularly from men.
13 July	406 responses (23.7% from men).
22 July	Survey closed. 433 responses (108 from men – 25%).

Table 1 : Timeline of questionnaire distribution

3.6.2 Interview Participants

Interview participants were selected following initial analysis of the questionnaire data. As outlined in Section 3.5.1, the participant selection model enables the purposeful selection of qualitative study participants following an initial quantitative study. The data was downloaded into an Excel spreadsheet, which allowed for easy sorting and manipulation of the information. Of the 433 participants who had completed questionnaires, 270 indicated that they were willing to be interviewed; of these, 155 were based in the UK. Respondents who were located elsewhere were contacted by email and informed that they would not be contacted for interview due to the high response rate and the preference for face-to-face interviews.

The remaining respondents were initially sorted by rough geographical location, in order to facilitate the organisation of the interviews; this also illustrated the range of respondents' locations, from very rural areas to cities. The data was then sorted by

gender and by the answers to the questions which had been identified as interview indicators (Questions 8, 9 and 11).

The selection of the respondents to invite to interview was thus achieved by purposeful (or purposive) sampling. “In qualitative data collection, purposeful sampling is used so that individuals are selected because they have experienced the central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2009, p. 217). Criterion sampling was employed: “Sampling all units (cases or individuals) that meet a particular criterion” (Bryman, 2012, p. 419). Respondents who were selected were not only those who had answered ‘Yes’ to the three indicator questions, but also those who had answered ‘No’ to all three, or had provided a mix of answers.

Additionally, answers to the open question (Question 12), which asked for more information about a friendship which had evolved from online to a regular offline relationship, were evaluated and used to decide whether the respondent should be approached for interview. Question 12 was predominantly used to confirm a decision rather than to specifically identify a participant.

Invitation emails were sent out to small groups of potential interviewees, asking them to reply if they were still willing to be interviewed; when a reply was received, a second email was sent offering a range of dates for the interview, and finally a third email confirming the arrangements. No reminder or ‘nagging’ emails were sent to people who did not reply.

The first tranche of interviews took place in mid and south Wales. 23 respondents were sent invitation emails, and 15 interviews were conducted. The second tranche were conducted in the Midlands and the south-east of England; 29 invitations were sent, resulting in 21 interviews.

The interview participants fell into four categories: those who had made friends online and had met them in person; those who had made friends online, had met them in person, and had subsequently incorporated them into their everyday life in some way; those who had made friends online but had not, or not yet, met them in person; and those who had not made friends online. The interview guide (Appendix D) shows

which questions were asked to each participant category. The first group of questions are directly related to the questionnaire and to the answers which the participants had given, the second group of questions relate to the study's research objectives, and the third and fourth groups are more general questions about friendship.

Since the interviews were semi-structured, and the participants had an element of control over the direction and the content of the conversation, questions were often asked in a different order to that given in the interview guide and, in some cases, were not asked at all.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Any research involving participants must take into account the ethical considerations of the study: "Any qualitative researcher who is not asleep ponders moral and ethical questions" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 288). A primary concern is that of informed consent, though protection from harm, for both the participant and the researcher, and the participant's right to privacy and confidentiality are also important ethical issues. Bryman notes that authors who write about ethics in social science research can differ about what is and is not ethically acceptable. He also notes that many of the arguments do not seem to have moved on in the past four or five decades, while at the same time they are becoming ever more central to debates about research by those who oversee and regulate it (2012, pp. 130-131).

A variety of foundation and professional guidelines were followed in this research with regard to ethical practices, including Aberystwyth University's Ethics Committee for Research Procedures' Template for Research Involving Human Tissue or Participants, the Department of Information Studies' Ethics Policy for Research and the Statement of Ethical Practice for the British Sociological Association. As the study of friendship is an element of social psychology, the British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct and their Guidelines for Ethical Practice in Psychological Research Online have also been consulted. Because the initial phase of the research was conducted online, consideration has been given to the "additional ethical and practical issues inherent in [Internet Mediated Research]" (British Psychological Society, 2007, p. 1).

3.7.1 Informed consent

Research participants should always give their agreement to take part on an informed and voluntary basis. The front page of the questionnaire (Appendix G) showed information about the research and the ethical commitments of the researcher. Without clicking on the “I agree” button at the bottom of the page, to show their consent, respondents could not continue to the questionnaire.

A formal information letter was provided for interview participants to retain (Appendix H), giving details about the research and the ethical commitments of the researcher. Two consent forms were provided for interview participants to complete and sign, indicating their understanding and consent (Appendix I); one was retained by the participant, and one was kept for the research records.

3.7.2 Protection from harm

“It is the responsibility of researchers to protect study participants from unintended harm resulting from the research” (Flicker, Haans, & Skinner, 2004, p. 128). Research should never expose any participant to physical or psychological conditions different from those experienced in everyday life. The possibility of psychological or emotional harm to participants as a result of the research was assessed as being minimal, since the topic, although personal, did not require the sharing of very private or confidential information. Nonetheless, all questionnaire respondents and interviewees were informed that they had the right to refuse to answer any question and to withdraw from participation at any time. The Code of Practice for the Safety of Social Researchers, developed by the Social Research Association, was consulted for guidance on reducing exposure to risk.

The concept of protection from harm also includes the researcher. While the consideration of confidentiality is usually not an issue with regard to the researcher, they should always “consider the possibility of physical or emotional harm through exposure to a fieldwork setting” (Bryman, 2012, p. 136). Interview locations were chosen by participants; they were asked to select a public place that was relatively quiet such as a coffee shop or hotel bar. Standard precautions with regard to researcher safety were taken: information was left with others as to the location and estimated duration of the interviews and they were contacted after the interview was

concluded, a mobile phone was always kept to hand and switched on, and interviewees were encouraged to leave the location first.

Of the 36 interviews, ten took place in non-public spaces, i.e. the interviewee's home. Only two of those ten were with someone who was neither a personal acquaintance nor had some other mutual connection; the potential for risk in these two interviews was considered to be low, since both were professionals who worked from home and whose identities had been verified.

3.7.3 Vulnerable participants

Examples of vulnerable participants include children or young people aged under 18, prisoners, hospital patients, and adults with learning difficulties. There was no intention to include people within this category in this research. However, the exclusion of vulnerable or underage participants is a particular concern when conducting research online; even on websites which ask members to state their age there is no way to positively confirm those statements. The front page of the questionnaire (Appendix G) clearly stated that respondents had to be 18 years of age to take part in the research. Additionally, Question 2, which asked for the respondent's age, was created as a required question with no option to input an age younger than 18. Of course it is possible that someone who is vulnerable or underage could complete an online questionnaire, but that would be very difficult to prove, and appropriate actions taken should serve to protect the researcher.

3.7.4 Participants' rights

Researchers should endeavour, at all times, to protect the rights, interests, sensitivity and privacy of the participants in their research. The protection of participants' rights is closely connected to the issue of informed consent.

A website (<http://online-friendship.com>) giving further details of the research and of the rights of participants within it was created before beginning the quantitative data collection; a link to the site was given in the invitation messages and on the front page of the questionnaire. Screenshots of two of the website pages can be seen in Appendices J and K.

Interview participants were reminded before beginning the interview that they had the right to withdraw at any time or to choose not to answer any questions. Explicit permission was sought to use a digital device to record the interview. None of the interviewees refused to be recorded, and in fact only one of them (Tanya) was noticeably uncomfortable about being recorded.

3.7.5 Privacy and anonymity

The privacy and anonymity of participants must be respected and, where possible, any threats to the privacy or anonymity of research data should be anticipated. The right to privacy is also closely linked to the idea of informed consent

because, to the degree that informed consent is given on the basis of a detailed understanding of what the research participant's involvement is likely to entail, he or she in a sense acknowledges that the right to privacy has been surrendered for that limited domain. (Bryman, 2012, p. 142)

Informed consent does not, however, actually revoke a participant's right to privacy: the option to refuse to answer specific questions or to withdraw from involvement during or after completion of the online questionnaire or the interview was made available to all participants.

The people who took part in the primary, online phase of the research were not asked for any identifying information such as their name or email address unless they stated that they were willing to be interviewed. At that point in the questionnaire they were asked for their name, contact email address and rough geographic location. This identifying information was separated from the rest of their answers at the data analysis stage, identified by a code number provided by the SurveyGizmo software, and was kept separately in the research records.

Questionnaire respondents were identified only by their SurveyGizmo code number; interview participants were given a pseudonym. Pseudonyms were selected by an online baby name generator (<http://www.babynames.co.uk>), though five participants requested a pseudonym of their own choice. Details of pseudonyms, linked to the code number, were stored separately to the main data set, and only the researcher can identify an individual by their pseudonym or code number. Any direct quotes are identified only by pseudonym, and are used with the explicit permission of the participant.

3.7.6 Confidentiality and security

“[The] issue of confidentiality raises particular difficulties for many forms of qualitative research. In quantitative research, it is relatively easy to make records anonymous and to report findings in a way that does not allow individuals to be identified” (Bryman, 2012, p. 136).

There may be limits to the levels of confidentiality that a researcher can guarantee to research participants; for example in cases where the researcher suspects that a participant may be a danger to herself or to others. This was explained as part of the consent procedure, as was the researcher’s duty to act if any potential danger was suspected, but that the participant would be informed if that was the case.

Security of research participants’ data is vital, particularly where personal or potentially harmful information may have been collected. Identifying data stored in electronic form has been protected by passwords, and is stored in several locations: Aberystwyth University’s M drive, a portable hard drive and in Dropbox, a web-based file hosting service. Data in paper form has been stored in locked cupboards and filing cabinets, and documents containing participants’ personal information (such as consent forms) are kept separately to printed questionnaires or interview transcripts.

3.7.7 Online research ethics

The majority of issues regarding research conducted via the Internet are essentially the same as those addressed by the principles given above. Nonetheless, “[the] ethics of Internet research have become a significant area of concern as use of the Internet, as research object and medium, has increased” (Bassett & O’Riordan, 2002, p. 234). The disadvantage of the lack of face-to-face contact between researcher and participant affects a number of important issues such as informed consent and provision of detailed information. This has been resolved as far as is possible in this research by the use of a detailed questionnaire front page and the creation of the research website. “To obtain informed consent without any individual contact, it is vital that all elements that would normally be part of the consent process be available online” (Flicker et al., 2004, p. 126).

There is no way of knowing if participants are underage or vulnerable, just as there is no way of knowing whether participants have fully read and understood the information provided. However, there is also less perceived compulsion to take part in or complete an online questionnaire; it is far easier to delete or change a page on the Internet than it is to choose to walk out of an interview.

Public-private boundaries are always a concern in Internet research. Invitations to participate in the online questionnaire were made both by public posts in online communities and by messages posted in blogs and on sites such as Twitter and Facebook; however, respondents did not have to indicate whether they had, or had not, taken part in the research. The questionnaire was available via a specific web address, and no questionnaire respondent would have been able to see the responses of another.

Another concern which is mentioned in the literature is the possibility of losing or accidentally publishing email communications or downloadable data files when conducting online research. This concern was borne in mind, but no confidential information was transferred between the researcher and participants by email, and reasonable precautions were taken, such as ensuring the use of up-to-date virus and firewall software and of passwords.

3.8 Limitations of the Methodology

A significant limitation during the quantitative phase of the data collection was the gender balance of the respondents. As indicated in Table 1, responses from men were less than 15% of the total after 25 days. The reason for this was that the majority of the online locations used to distribute the questionnaire had a predominantly female membership or audience. Weight Loss Resources does have members who are male, but the percentage is quite low; the same is true of the UK Cross Stitch email list, the Sentinel UK email list, and the LiveJournals and Dreamwidth blogs where links to the questionnaire were posted⁸.

As a result of the poor response rate from men, more invitation messages were distributed in various locations, asking particularly for men to complete the questionnaire. While it is

⁸ The selection of locations with a low percentage of male users was not intentional, but was certainly a reflection of the type of websites which I visit regularly.

recognised that this is not an ideal solution to the problem, the ratio of female to male respondents was considered to be too high to allow any kind of conclusions to be drawn from the data, and it could have had an impact on the selection of interview participants. Ten days after the second call for participants, which was disseminated by a number of different people in a variety of fora including an archery discussion board and a forum for alumni of a different university, as well as via Twitter, Facebook, and personal emails, the percentage of male respondents had risen to 25%, and the survey was closed. Interestingly, the percentage of questionnaire respondents who were willing to be interviewed remained constant within the gender groups (55% of men, 65% of women).

The questionnaire appeared to be easily understood by respondents. There were some minor issues with Question 7 (“Which online communities/social networks do you belong to?”). Not all online social networks (OSNs) could be named in the questionnaire, and a total of 154 additional OSNs were listed by respondents in the free text box following Question 7, many of which were only mentioned by one person. In the interest of completeness, a separate spreadsheet was created for the answers to this question, and included all online social networks mentioned by participants. A straightforward count of the number of OSNs belonged to was correlated with the responses to other questions.

The issues with regard to generalisability in online research have been discussed earlier in this chapter. Although a number of solutions to this problem, including the collection of a large number of responses, and the comparison of the online results to those of similar offline research, have been suggested in the literature, these were not appropriate for this study. It was not possible, with one researcher and limited time and resources, to keep the online questionnaire open for longer or to continue to distribute invitations, nor would it have been possible to interview everyone who indicated their willingness to take part. However, the number of responses received in what was a relatively short time, and the percentage of respondents who were willing to be interviewed, indicated that far larger data sets, both quantitative and qualitative, could be achieved if this approach is developed in future studies.

With regard to the validity of the qualitative element of this study, the intention at the outset of the research process was to have all of the interview transcripts checked by the participants, in order to attempt to ensure validity of the qualitative element of the research

process. The offer to send a copy of the transcript to the participant was made at the end of each interview; however, of the 36 interviewees, only three wished to see their transcripts, although all of them expressed an interest in reading the final work. It is possible that, since the subject matter was not particularly confidential or problematic, the participants did not feel the need to revisit or 'double-check' the interview transcript; in fact, several specifically said that they were uncomfortable with the idea of reading a verbatim report of the conversation.

Further limitations of the study are discussed in Chapter Eight.

3.9 Summary

Following an initial review of the literature, it was decided to use a mixed methods research design for this study. The model chosen was the Sequential Explanatory Design (participant selection model) (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 73), incorporating an initial quantitative phase, followed by a qualitative phase for which participants were selected using the quantitative data.

The quantitative data collection was conducted using a web-based self-completion questionnaire, hosted by the SurveyGizmo website. The questionnaire was distributed to a variety of websites and online communities, by several different people and in different ways. A second tranche of invitations was sent out asking for men to take part in the research, after it was realised that the ratio of female to male respondents was too high.

Following the closure of the questionnaire, a brief analysis was conducted of the data in order to enable the purposeful selection of participants for the second, qualitative, phase of the study.

The qualitative interviews were conducted face-to-face in locations selected by the participants; they were recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed shortly after completion of the interviews.

Full analysis of the quantitative data was done using SPSS v.20; univariate and bivariate analysis of the variables resulting from the questionnaire answers. The qualitative data

(interview transcripts) were coded and analysed using NVivo v.10: *a priori* codes were created using the research question and objectives, and the interview guides; subsequently, *a posteriori* codes were created during the analysis process, with themes emerging from the text of the interviews.

Although the research design contains both quantitative and qualitative elements, the emphasis of the study is qualitative: the primary purpose of the quantitative data collection and analysis was to facilitate the selection of participants in the second, qualitative phase of the research.

The next chapter discusses significant themes emergent from the data as a whole, and relates them to the literature. The three subsequent chapters present the data in detail.

Chapter Four

Friending and Friendship: An Overview of the Research

The most interesting themes to emerge during this research were not necessarily directly related to the central research question or to the research aim and objectives; instead they provided empirical evidence of the current online behaviour and attitudes of UK-based users of online communities and social networking sites, and their experiences and opinions of online friendship. This chapter discusses these themes, relating them to the literature and established theories.

Quotes from research participants used throughout this chapter are identified by Respondent ID (questionnaire respondents) or pseudonym (interviewees).

4.1 Overview of the Research

This research set out to explore the online social networking experiences of Internet users in the United Kingdom, with a particular focus on the development of online friendships and how they compared to and affected participants' face-to-face social networks. While this study was inspired and influenced by previous research in the field, it does not seek to replicate that research, but rather to build upon it and to relate it to the current social environment.

Using a mixed methods research design, combining an online questionnaire and face-to-face interviews, a significant amount of data was collected which provides a snapshot of Internet users' experiences in the second decade of the 21st century. While the interview participants were all based in England and Wales, the questionnaire respondents were from a total of 25 countries, with the majority (258, or 60%) being from the UK.

As a piece of exploratory research, this study does not seek to provide definitive answers to research questions but, as the name suggests, to explore and to better understand the subject, and to provide generalisations about the sample groups. While the results cannot be considered representative of the entire UK-based Internet population, the themes which have been identified will be relevant to many individuals and communities.

The results of this study echo much of the research which has been done over the past two decades, and in doing so shows that, although technology and society have changed significantly during that time, the emotions, desires and needs of individual people have not.

Friendship has been the subject of investigation and discourse since Ancient Greece, and the writings of Plato and Aristotle on friendship are still studied and debated today. The subjects of the development of communities and friendships online, and their impact on participants' everyday, face-to-face lives, whether positive or negative, have been discussed within the literature since the early days of social networking websites (Baym, 2000; Lea & Spears, 1992; McKenna & Bargh, 1999, 2000; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Parks & Roberts, 1997; Rheingold, 2000; Stoll, 1996; Turkle, 1995). Since the emergence of what is commonly termed Web 2.0, the second generation of the World Wide Web, which enabled users to interact, contribute and edit content online, social networking websites have become increasingly sophisticated and ubiquitous. The impact that they have had on users' everyday lives has been covered at length in the academic literature (d. boyd, 2006; boyd & Ellison, 2008; Dutton et al., 2013; Ellison et al., 2009; McKnight, Lankton & Tripp, 2011; Porter, Donthu & Baker, 2012; Thelwall, 2009a, 2009b; Trepte & Reinecke, 2013; Vitak et al., 2011).

Much of the literature on the users of social networking websites and on the friendships which are created online has tended to be from the USA, and more recently from Asia, and has predominantly focused on the experiences of university students. This research sought to explore whether the results of those studies were reflected in the experiences of the UK-based participants of this research, the majority of whom were aged over 35.

4.2 A Representative Sample?

As noted above, the participants in this research, both questionnaire respondents and interviewees, were on average older than the sample groups used in much of the extant research into online friendship and the use of social networking sites for social interactions. Much of the research into these subjects has looked at the experiences of under-18s and of college and university students; although there has been a growth in research into the use of social technologies by the elderly, there has been significantly less research into the experiences of adult populations aged between 30 and 65 (Bane et al., 2010; Hardey &

Atkinson, 2012; Quinn, 2013). Furthermore, the majority of research in this area has been conducted in the United States, although there has been an increase in studies from Australasia and Asia over the past decade.

There are, of course, national statistics services in most countries of the world, many of which produce reports on Internet use. Examples of large-scale surveys about the Internet and online social networking behaviour of a wide range of ages in the UK are those conducted by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and Oxford Internet Surveys (OxIS). In the USA, the Pew Research Center is a think tank based in Washington DC, which conducts public opinion surveys into a variety of different areas.

The Pew Internet and American Life Project is part of the Pew Research Center, and produces highly-regarded and frequently-cited research into the impact of the Internet on individuals and communities. Many of their national surveys are conducted using the telephone, and participants are selected by random digit sampling of landline and mobile phone numbers. As a result, a wide range of ages are represented, and the number of respondents is usually somewhere between 1,500-2,000.

The ONS is the UK's national statistical institute and is a government department; it conducts a variety of national surveys on a number of different topics, from which data on Internet access is collated and published in several reports each year. The number of participants for the different surveys range from around 1,500 to over 17,000. OxIS performs a similar function to the Pew Internet project, within the UK: it is part of the Oxford Internet Institute at the University of Oxford, and is "the only ongoing survey of Internet use in Britain" (OxIS, 2013). OxIS uses random sampling to select addresses, and uses a survey research company to conduct face-to-face interviews with a randomly selected member of the household. Over the past three OxIS reports (Dutton, Helsper, & Gerber, 2009; Dutton & Blank, 2011; and Dutton et al., 2013), the number of interviews undertaken has ranged from just over 2,000 to almost 3,250, covering a range of ages from 14 upwards.

In order to provide a brief overview of the usual age range of research participants in this field, 'quick-and-dirty' searches were undertaken in a variety of online locations, including Web of Knowledge, LISTA (Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts), ScienceDirect, and JSTOR, as well as in several individual journals (e.g. *Information*,

Communication and Society and *CyberPsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*). Search terms used were “online friendship” and “online relationship” and, where possible, the publication date range was limited to the year 2000 onwards. Abstracts for articles which seemed relevant were examined for information about their samples; where information was provided about the age of research participants, this was recorded.

Of the 593 abstracts which were sampled, 81 contained information about the age of participants. Of these, 36 involved participants aged under 25, including schoolchildren, adolescents, and people described by the researchers as “young” or “youth”, and 30 had participants of college or university age. Only 15 of the 81 abstracts mentioned participants who were either of a wide range of ages (e.g. 15-65, 15-75) or specifically described as “adult” or “elderly”. This equates to just over 18% of the abstracts providing sample information, and personal experience and observation suggest that this is not an inaccurate figure. Only 49 of the 81 abstracts specified a country and, of those, four named the UK and a further two were conducted across a number of countries including the UK.

Within this research, the most commonly selected age groups for the questionnaire respondents were 25-34 and 35-44, with 127 respondents choosing each of these options. Of the 258 respondents who were based in the UK, the most common age range was 35-44, selected by 82 (32%). This was also the most common age group among the interviewees, chosen by 42%.

It seems clear, therefore, that the majority of participants in this research were part of an age group, and possibly also a nationality, which is under-researched in the areas of online friendship and the use of social networking sites.

4.3 Making Friends in Cyberspace (in 1996)

The purpose of this research is similar to that stated by Malcolm Parks and Kory Floyd in their 1996 article, *Making Friends in Cyberspace*, in which they asked four questions: “How often do personal relationships form in Internet newsgroups, who has them, how close or developed do they become, and do relationships started on line migrate to other settings?” (p. 80). Three of these questions are related to the objectives of this research: to discover whether people met online are considered to be friends, to discover how participants

evaluate their online friendships, and to explore whether online friendships are integrated into offline social groups. The results of Parks and Floyd's study are broadly similar to the results of this research, despite the significant developments in the Internet and World Wide Web, and the ways in which people interact online, which have occurred in the two decades between them.

Of the 176 respondents to Parks and Floyd's survey, almost two thirds (60.7%) reported the development of a personal relationship within a newsgroup. Although opposite-sex relationships were slightly more common than same-sex relationships (55% and 45% respectively), only 7.9% of those reported had made romantic connections. This research had a larger sample, with 433 respondents to the online questionnaire, but the results were broadly similar, with 81% stating that they had made a friend online; of these, 10% were actually romantic relationships.

Parks and Floyd considered the frequency of network convergence, "as the participants introduce one another to each other's friends and family and develop a common social circle" (p. 91). This was lower than they had anticipated, particularly with regard to converging online and offline social groups. It was more common for individuals to have developed network convergence online (introducing online friends to other online contacts and thereby being connected to many of the same people online) than to have introduced their online friends to their everyday, face-to-face social networks. However, of the respondents who had developed personal relationships online, nearly two-thirds had migrated their communication offline, using the telephone, postal service or face-to-face meetings to contact their made-online friends.

In this research, of the questionnaire respondents who said that they had made an online friend, almost two thirds stated that they had been integrated into their everyday life to some extent, whether through regular meetings or by being introduced to other friends and family. There were examples of friendships moving exclusively to telephone contact (Minerva), of frequent meetings (Kenton), and of online friends becoming a part of the extended family (Enfys). Only one interviewee mentioned writing letters to online friends (Lydia); letter-writing has become an increasingly rare pastime in the UK over the past decade or so.

Overall, although Parks and Floyd’s study cannot be directly compared to this research, it is clear from the results quoted above that there are similarities between them. The samples are quite different, however, as shown in Table 2 below.

Results of study	Parks and Floyd (1996)	Merry (2014)
No. of respondents	176	433
Type of online social network	Usenet newsgroups	Various SNSs and online communities
Age range	15-57. Mean 31.6 years.	From 18-24 to over 65. Majority in range 25-44.
Gender split of respondents	68% male	73% female
Respondents made friends online	61%	81%
% of romantic relationships	7.9%	10%
Friendship creation: gender differences	72% of women 54.5% of men	85% of women 70% of men
Migration online-to-offline (network convergence)	31%	56%
Migration to other medium	64%	Not specifically asked

(All percentages are rounded up or down to nearest .5%)

Table 2 : Comparison between Parks and Floyd (1996) and this research

The experiences of the participants of both studies are broadly similar: a significant proportion had made friends online, many of whom could be described as good friends; it was relatively common for those friendships to be migrated to another medium of communication, whether that was also at a distance or face-to-face; and it is clear that, in both studies, participants did not “draw a sharp boundary between relationships in cyberspace and those in real life” (Parks & Floyd, 1996, p. 94).

4.4 A Duality of Reality

The concept which Nathan Jurgenson has termed “digital dualism” – the idea that online is ‘virtual’ while offline is ‘real’ – is one which was mentioned in many of the interviews. Jurgenson argued that the widespread availability of Internet access and the ubiquity of mobile technologies means that there is no true separation between the digital and the physical (2011). From the experiences of the participants in this research, it is clear that for many Internet users there is a definite perceived difference between their actions and

interactions online and offline. While many people consider online friendships and communities to be just as real as those created in a physical environment, there was an acknowledgement of a difference between real *via a screen* and real *via face-to-face contact*:

you don't have any kind of a real context to put [online friends] in, as opposed to a virtual context. (Declan)

I think you always have to meet someone, really, because you get so much-- the screen is a barrier, really. (Andrew)

A number of questionnaire respondents and interview participants made it clear that they disliked the use of the word "real" to differentiate between online and offline, but were not able to provide an alternative term. It may be that some of the fault lies in the language which we use to define these different elements of our lives; "real" and "real life" are obvious and natural terms to use, even for those who do not differentiate between their virtual and physical interactions:

I do not really acknowledge the "real" v. the implied "less-real" life. (Respondent 454)

It's a horrible cliché, online friends and 'real life' friends. They are real life friends anyway. (Kenton)

Jurgenson's answer to the problem of digital dualism is what he calls "augmented reality". Rather than the more established definition of that term in which technology enhances or adds to the physical environment, such as additional information shown on the screen during sporting events or a mobile phone application which identifies businesses close to the user's location, Jurgenson uses it to describe the way in which the physical and the virtual are "increasingly meshed" (2011, n.p.). He further refined his theories by sub-dividing both digital dualism and augmented reality into 'strong' and 'mild' categories: strong digital dualism states that the physical and the virtual are entirely different and do not interact, while mild digital dualism accepts that there are differences between those realities but that they do interact. Strong augmented reality argues that the physical and virtual are part of the same reality and have the same properties, while mild augmented reality states that they are of one reality, though with different properties, and also that they interact (2012, n.p.).

The results of this research support the less extreme theories put forward by Jurgenson, although, as Nicholas Carr notes in his discussion of Jurgenson's theories, "the two extreme

categories ... are purely theoretical constructs” (2013, n.p.), and thus it would be difficult, if not impossible, to find SNS users who fully subscribe to either of them. While some interview participants stated that they felt that their online friendships were deep and strong despite having never met in person (Bella, Henry, Lydia, Veronica), all of the interviewees said that a face-to-face meeting was desirable, whether in order to cement the relationship, or simply to add an extra dimension to it. This suggests that, while online friendships are made and maintained entirely independently of face-to-face meetings, and can be of benefit to participants by providing them with social interaction and support, there is frequently a desire on the part of those involved to integrate those friendships, whether fleetingly or permanently, into their “physical world” (Jurgenson, 2011, n.p.).

The dichotomy between online and offline, or virtual and physical, has been significantly lessened by the increase in use of mobile technologies and in the use of SNSs to manage and maintain existing and geographically close friendships. A 2011 Pew Research Center report about the social impact of using social networking sites found that “40% of users have friended all of their closest confidants” on one or more SNS (Hampton, Goulet et al., 2011, p. 5); this was a substantial increase from the 29% which was reported in a similar survey in 2008. A similar report published in the UK in 2011 stated that almost half of respondents reported that having access to the Internet meant that they had increased contact with friends and family who lived at a distance, while approximately a quarter stated that it had led to increased contact with people who lived locally (Dutton & Blank, 2011, p. 38). These percentages showed only a slight increase over the reported figures in a similar 2009 study.

The use of social networking sites to maintain existing and long-standing friendships, as well as family relationships, has become more common over the past decade. Facebook seems particularly suited to this, perhaps because of its functionality; users are able not only to post publicly but also to send private messages and share photographs. Interviewee Peggy was the only Facebook user who did not Friend people who were a regular part of her life, partly because she saw them regularly and partly because she found it useful to have a private forum in which to “vent”. The majority of interviewees used Facebook and other SNSs to keep in touch with friends and family both near and far:

I have had more interaction with my mum-in-law since I’ve been interacting online with her than I have-- It’s more regular. We can just send each other a little message (Kendra)

it's gone the other way a lot. People I knew in real life, who I've then Friended on [LiveJournal], I have got to know them better. And the friendship has deepened, precisely through its online-ness. (Veronica)

It is clear from the responses to this research that Jurgenson's theory of "mild digital dualism" is appropriate for the majority of 'Generation X' users. There is a differentiation between the interactions which are conducted virtually and those which take place in person, while at the same time many friendships, whether made online or offline, are maintained and nurtured using social networking sites.

4.5 Dimensions of Social Capital and Friendship

A notable similarity between social capital and friendship scholarship is the acknowledged difficulty in providing a single agreed definition for either concept. In the case of social capital this seems to be because, while there is general agreement about what social capital does – provides value to the members of social networks as a result of that membership and, by extension, to the wider community – there is less accord with regard to what exactly it is. In the case of friendship, the intrinsic subjectivity of the topic means that it cannot be quantified; human affections and emotions are not easily labelled and classified.

Despite these difficulties, there are a range of accepted measures for both social capital and friendship. While research into social capital tends to focus either on its impact on community (Putnam, 2000; Putnam et al., 2004; Westwood, 2011) or on individuals (Lin, 2001; Steinfield et al., 2008; Wellman & Frank, 2001; Yang, 2007), the measures used to evaluate levels of social capital tend to be broadly similar. "The individual is the natural unit of observation and measurement.... It then follows that survey items about social capital are meant to measure social capital at the individual level" (Yang, 2007, pp. 19-20). Individual social capital measures are therefore often aggregated in order to attempt to measure community, or collective, social capital, which could lead to problematic or misleading results.

Five common measures of social capital are levels of trust, norms of behaviour, reciprocity, the size and quality of social networks, and involvement in the wider community. The most frequently used measure, and arguably the most important, is trust: whether a participant

feels a generalised sense of trust towards others, both known and unknown, and towards institutions. This is closely linked to the idea of norms – accepted standards of behaviour within a group or community. There is an assumption within any social group, whether virtual or physical, that those within the group will behave appropriately and within the established norms: these can vary from arriving punctually for an appointment to not revealing a recent plot point in a fan community. Reciprocity can be direct, in which an action is directly returned, or generalised, in which there is no expectation of an immediate return as the result of an action. Measuring the size and quality of an individual's social networks can indicate both bonding and bridging social capital by examining the types of people who are part of the networks and the frequency of their interactions. Assessing an individual's involvement in their wider community, for example by volunteering or participating in local activities, may not provide an accurate measure of their personal social capital, but it may indicate their place within their society, from which they can derive individual benefit.

An observation which arose out of the early literature survey stage of this research was the correspondence between the measures used to evaluate levels of social capital and those used to evaluate friendship. While the development of social capital within friendship networks is a thoroughly researched subject, the focus has tended to be on “formal associational involvement” (Spencer & Pahl, 2006, p. 206) and has “often overlooked the interpersonal spatial dynamics of friendships” (Bunnell, Yea, Peake, Skelton & Smith, 2012, p. 494). There is an obvious correlation between social capital and friendship, and this is reflected in the established measures of the two concepts.

As mentioned above, though a single strict definition of friendship has not been, or cannot be, established, there are a number of accepted defining qualities and measures for adult friendship which have been documented in the literature. The various elements and measures of friendship which can be found in published research can be collated into five broad dimensions: Trust and Truthfulness; Affection and Acceptance; Exchange and Assistance; Commitment and Commonality; and Similarity and Understanding. While affection, or liking, is the most obvious criterion of friendship, it is also so intrinsically bound up in the idea of ‘friend’ that it is not usually the most common quality or measure discussed in friendship research. Additionally, as noted above, it is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify; the most useful way in which it can be used in the evaluation of

friendship networks is as an individual's means of comparison or differentiation between different levels of friends (e.g. acquaintance, work friend, long-standing friend, and best friend).

Trust is frequently cited as being an essential element of friendship: "The inevitable uncertainties of interpersonal interactions have to be overcome through trust" (Pahl, 2000, p. 63). Within friendship, trust allows friends to share personal feelings and stories on the presumption that they will not be betrayed. In the 'Trust and Truthfulness' dimension used herein, it links closely to other elements such as honesty, confidentiality, loyalty, and self-disclosure, all of which are bidirectional or multidirectional; as mentioned later in this section, equality and reciprocity are necessary to develop and maintain a friendship. Self-disclosure, in particular, is an important part of building trust in any relationship, whether online or offline. It results in shared knowledge, in cathartic unburdening of secrets, and also as a means of authentication and identification (Whitty & Joinson, 2008). In the measurement of both friendship and social capital, establishing levels of trust is the first step in evaluating the strength and quality of the relationships and networks in which an individual is involved. Several questionnaire respondents mentioned sharing secrets with their online friends and, in one case, being trusted by a friend to assess her mental health status (Respondent 104). In the interviews, when participants were asked about how they would define a friend, or whether there were any qualities they felt were important in a friend, all of the elements listed above were mentioned. More than half of the interviewees immediately mentioned 'trust', often as their first thought in response to the question. Self-disclosure was also frequently mentioned, although couched in a different way:

Somebody that you might trust with some intimate confidences, where intimate might not need to be deepest darkest, but you might share an unprofessional comment with a friend that you probably wouldn't do with somebody who is simply a colleague. (Ivor)

You feel you know something about their life and are involved in aspects of their life that aren't entirely make-believe. (Daisy)

As mentioned above, having affection for someone is the most basic characteristic of being a friend. Within the dimension 'Affection and Acceptance', this encompasses not only a high level of liking or fondness, but also an admiration for the character of the friend and for their behaviour and accomplishments (Adams et al., 2000; Dawson, 2012). Furthermore, friendship should provide a space in which one finds acceptance and the ability to be

oneself; again, this is tied tightly to the concept of trust and to the expectation that a friend will be truthful without being judgemental (Baym, 2011; Briggles, 2008; Pahl, 2000). These characteristics also relate to norms of behaviour as an element of social capital; though these are often considered within social capital research as the norms of a community, there are also generally accepted social norms which can be applied to friendship. Within friendship, acceptance is an important norm; the recognition of the other's failures or successes without being critical or envious.

Friends are people who appreciate what you do, appreciate you for yourself, not for what they can get out of it. ... People who would promote your activities without any thought of reflected glory or anything like that. (Henry)

Honesty, though categorised herein alongside trust, is also an important social or friendship norm, along with emotional support and 'being there' for each other (Felmlee, 1999, p. 61).

Someone to rely on, trust, confide in. Someone who will also tell you, warts and all. But will also be there for you when you're down in the dumps. (Nancy)

Several interviewees mentioned the importance of being able to disagree or argue with their friends, without any long-term repercussions. Graham put it slightly differently:

I'd let a friend be rude to me. And take it on the chin, and maybe know that they were joking – and maybe even if they weren't joking, be prepared to give as good as I got. If an acquaintance was rude to me, they're not going to be an acquaintance for much longer. (Graham)

The third dimension of friendship measures is 'Exchange and Assistance', including elements such as reciprocity, equality and equity, assistance, and support. All of these correlate to the social capital measure of reciprocity, in which an individual may perform an action with the expectation of an immediate or equal return (direct or specific reciprocity) or without such an expectation (indirect reciprocity). Indirect reciprocity, or altruism, does not have a role within established friendship, since it often occurs between strangers. A significant example of reciprocity within the context of friendship is that of mutual self-disclosure; if one friend shares personal information with another, there is an expectation that there will be an equivalent reciprocal disclosure.

Mutual help, support and advice you can give each other, that benefits each other. And that it's a very two-way street. It's not always all one person, it's a mutual thing. (Hermione)

The equality and mutuality of friendship is also an important factor for most people, though two interviewees – Arthur and Torsten – did not feel that it was necessary in order for a

friendship to flourish. Nancy Baym, citing the five qualities of friendship identified by William Rawlins, said that “friendship is a relationship between equals; it’s not a relationship where one person has more power than the other” (2011, n.p.). Mendelson and Kay (2003) argued that there had to be equity in a friendship; that friends should have equal “benefit-to-contribution ratios” (p. 102), which was also reflected in the interviews, for example Minerva’s observation that

friendships fade when you are not getting anything out of it. It’s not that we set off to get something out of a friend; you need to get certain things from a friendship, like some kind of fulfilment or just plain happiness – joy – out of the friendship. (Minerva)

Another expectation within a friendship is that of receiving, and providing, support and assistance, whether that is emotional, practical or even financial. This is an area where there may be inequality due to one friend’s inability to provide, for example, physical help, but there is generally an assumption that what one friend is willing and able to offer in terms of support, the other will be willing and able to return.

I think if you care about somebody, they can expect you to care about them, and there are certain things that you would do. You’d put yourself out for them, wouldn’t you? And they’re entitled to think that you would, and you expect the same with them. (Ruby)

If someone opens up to you, you tend to open up more back to them, and it becomes a two-way thing, and you end up telling each other things that you never dreamt you would talk about to anybody. (Andrew)

The ‘Commitment and Commonality’ dimension covers, in many ways, the elements which help to start and to develop friendships: having common interests and personalities, finding enjoyment in each other’s company, and making the effort to maintain the friendship through frequent contact. In terms of social capital, this relates to the quality of the social networks to which individuals belong; in other words, the depth and strength of the friendship ties which make up those networks. There was an interesting dichotomy in the research participants’ discussion of the frequency with which they were in contact with their friends. When asked about the essential elements of friendship, the importance of regular communication, whether virtual or face-to-face, was frequently mentioned:

I would say a friend is somebody that I do see regularly (Ruby)

there’s others that you have to at least talk to on email or something, on a regular basis (Daisy)

Contrary to this, apparently, is the suggestion that a good friend is someone with whom communication may be extremely sporadic but, when contact is made, there is a sense that no time has passed at all:

my proper, proper friends are people that I can not see for three months, but then when I see them, it's like we saw each other yesterday. (Ursula)

I've got friends from childhood who I don't see, probably from one year's end to the next, but when you pick up, you pick up from where you've left off. It's like seeing them yesterday. (Nancy)

The commitment to regular contact appears, for some people, to become less important as the friendship deepens and confidence and trust in the other person grows.

A notable difference between friendships which are predominantly conducted online and those which are conducted face-to-face is the physical aspect; one cannot touch or hug a virtual friend, nor can one read the other's body language. Virtual friendships are reliant on the participants' commitment to accurately portraying their emotions and reactions via text; although the option of video chat is now widely available, it was rarely mentioned by the participants in this research. Recent friendship research has posited that virtual friendships cannot be considered to be true friendships because of the lack of physical cues: "The internet is perhaps unique in its facilitating personal relations primarily on the basis of voluntary self-disclosure, and eliminating many significant aspects of non-voluntary self-disclosure." (Cocking & Matthews, 2006, p. 227) (see Section 2.8.4.1). Fröding and Peterson (2012) also state that "virtual friendship is no genuine friendship" (p. 204): their claim is based upon the argument that the Aristotelian theory of friendship requires mutual admiration and love, and that there can be no assurance for virtual friends that their relationship is equal and balanced. As noted above, however, participants in this research used equality and reciprocity as defining characteristics of their friendships:

I think one thing is that, in a modern phrase, they'll be there for you. Mutual support and communication. (Christine)

It's a very two-way street. It's not always all one person, it's a mutual thing. (Hermione)

By far the most frequent way in which friendships are created online is through common interest groups. Situational friendships, similar to those created in places of work or study, are also frequent, though they often dissolve gradually if one or both friends are no longer

involved in the situation. As Declan stated in his interview, a single common interest may not be enough to sustain a friendship:

People become an acquaintance because they've got something in common, then they perhaps become a friend because they've got multiple things in common. (Declan)

Having a shared hobby or activity was mentioned by all of the interview participants in this research as something which led to or maintained friendships. As Declan noted, a single commonality may bring people together and allow them to discover other shared interests.

I think, people that you meet through any sort of thing, like through fandom online, or people I met through my department here, we've already got pretty strong interests in common (Daisy)

The final dimension of friendship measures, 'Similarity and Understanding', also relates to the social capital measure of the quality of an individual's social networks; it is associated with the concept of bonding social capital, which is created between people who are similar to each other, and often involves direct reciprocity. The theory of homogeneity, or similarity, as a defining characteristic within friendship pairs or groups was not entirely borne out by the interview responses: when asked whether their various friends were similar to each other, or to themselves, there were a variety of answers. A third of the interviewees said that their online friends and offline friends were similar types of people, while another third felt that there were few similarities between their online and offline friends.

Well, again, all my fandom friends probably have personality types in common. [...] But my toddler group friends, it really is just-- I mean, they're very nice people, I like them a lot, but for the most part it is a friendship of common circumstance, if you see what I mean. So I would say that was different. I suppose, brutally, they are people I wouldn't be friends with unless we had children – it's only because we have children of the same age. (Veronica)

Parks and Roberts (1997) used the scale item 'Predictability/Understanding' as a way to evaluate the development of personal relationships online; this item related to an individual's depth of understanding of their friend and their ability to predict the friend's reactions and attitudes. This concept was discussed by some interviewees in terms of a sense of empathy and caring, for example Minerva, who helped her online friend to manage her bipolar disorder, and Brian and Lydia, who had, respectively, given and received financial support as part of an online group of friends.

One established measure of social capital which is not directly correlated to measures of friendship is that of an individual's involvement in their community. Though taking part in local activities and becoming, for example, politically engaged will undoubtedly have benefits for the individual as well as for the community, it is not included here. What has been described above could be called direct social capital – the personal, private value received from being a part of dyadic or group friendships – and would not, in most cases, be derived from involvement in wider, community-based activities.

As the section above shows, there is a significant correlation between measures of social capital and measures of friendship. Recent research in the United States has shown that the size of core networks, or the number of confidants, reported by individuals has reduced by approximately one third in the past 25 years (Brashears, 2011; Hampton, Sessions & Her, 2011). There is no directly comparable study in the UK. However, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) undertakes research into national well-being in its 34 member countries, including a measure of “perceived social network support”, achieved by asking participants whether they had people they could rely on if they were in trouble (OECD, 2013, p. 56). More than 95% of respondents in the United Kingdom answered yes to the question, indicating, according to the OECD, a high level of social network support.

The past 25 years have seen increased access to the Internet, the invention of the World Wide Web and its evolution into the “social Web” (Jenkins, 2012, n.p.); these developments appear, at least in the United States, to coincide with a reduction in individuals' core networks of confidants (Brashears, 2011) and in levels of community social capital (Putnam, 2000, 2004). The results of this study, however, do not indicate a reduction in people's number or quality of friendships: whether they spoke of online or offline friends, and whether their social interactions were predominantly online or face-to-face, there was no indication that any of the participants felt any lack with regard to their social lives. If we consider the distinct correlation between the measurements of friendship and of social capital, the results of this study indicate that levels of ‘direct social capital’ are high, providing individuals with significant benefits, whether social, practical or affective.

4.6 Aristotelian Friendship Online

The various friendship measures discussed above are found to different degrees within different types of friendship. The participants in this research tended to divide their friends into three simple and broad categories: acquaintances and casual (such as work) friends, ‘real’ or ‘proper’ friends, and best friends. Within social network research, the ties which are made by individuals with members of their social networks have historically also been split into three categories: strong, weak or absent (Granovetter, 1973). A strong tie is formed between people who know each other well, engage in “mutual confiding” (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1361), and whose relationship is reciprocal; these ties usually result from, or in, bonding social capital, between homogeneous individuals. Weak ties are links between people who do not have a strong affiliation, who may categorise each other as acquaintances, and who have different social circles; although weak ties may appear to have little value, they help to create bridging social capital and to provide connections and information sharing between discrete groups. Absent ties are those where there is no connection or no significant connection, such as with a nodding acquaintance (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1361).

Aristotle categorised friendship into three types – of utility, of pleasure, and of virtue – in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, written in the fourth century BC. Friendships of utility are connections with people who are useful for their skills or knowledge; friendships of pleasure are those created with people with whom it is pleasant to spend time, sharing hobbies or interests; while friendships of virtue are “perfect friendship, ... based upon goodness.” (Dawson, 2012, p. 2). Friends of utility and pleasure may be weak ties, easily broken with no significant consequence to either party, while virtuous friends are those with whom there is a strong tie, and are often described by those involved as “close” or “best” friends. The dimensions of friendship detailed above in Section 4.5 relate particularly to the Aristotelian ideal of virtuous, perfect friendship, though there are elements of both usefulness and pleasure in all friendships.

The essential characteristics of friendship, as outlined by Aristotle, have not changed in the almost 2,500 years since the *Nicomachean Ethics* was published: today, ‘useful’ friends can include mechanics, shopkeepers and neighbours; ‘pleasant’ friends may be work colleagues, fellow members of a club or choir, or other situational friends; and ‘virtuous’ or ‘perfect’ friends are those with whom one can share secrets, be truly oneself, and “recognize each

other's moral excellence" (Pahl, 2000, p. 22). However, as mentioned throughout this research, the increasingly widespread use of the Internet has meant that there has been a significant shift over the past three decades in the ways in which individuals can make, develop and nurture their friendships. The question of whether friendships as Aristotle described them, and in particular the most valued, virtuous friendships, can be created and maintained online is one which has been discussed at length in the academic literature.

There were many examples in the questionnaire responses and interviews of online friendships of utility. LinkedIn was the fourth most popular online social network named by questionnaire respondents; while the site includes discussion forums, it essentially serves to connect individuals with others who have similar professional interests, thus creating weak ties which could be of use to those involved. Similarly, Ravelry, a "knit and crochet community" (Ravelry, 2014), is seen by some members as an information resource rather than a social community:

It's information seeking mostly, because I get some of my knitting patterns from there. But I have actually put questions and answered odd questions on Ravelry – helped people. (Minerva)

Well, although I'm on Ravelry, I don't tend to use it really as a social network. (Bella)

There were also several examples given by interviewees of Friending other users, for example on Facebook or World of Warcraft, in order to progress to higher levels in a game (discussed in Section 6.6.3), for example Edwin, Evelyn and Kendra, although these connections tended to be entirely utilitarian and did not involve a significant amount of interaction.

Friends made online for the purposes of, or as a result of, gaming also fall under the definition of friendships of pleasure. For Kendra and Kenton, in particular, the time spent gaming and the chat which took place during gameplay was important, although in different ways. Kendra role-played in World of Warcraft, so her socialising tended to be mostly in character:

But you know, there's levels of friendship even within what I'm doing, which isn't full friendship as you would maybe understand that we're meeting, having drinks [...] I like going on to socialise. In this weird way that isn't me, only part of me (laughs). It's still of value. It's light relief, it's immersive, and it makes it more than a game. (Kendra)

The majority of Kendra's fellow players were strangers, with whom she shared very little personal information but from whose companionship, within the context of the game, she derived a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction. For Kenton, however, his gaming companions were good friends, all of whom he had met at least once. He did not fully immerse himself into the game in the same way as Kendra; although when he played he was fully committed to the game, he chatted as himself rather than his character, and enjoyed the juxtaposition of the on-screen action and the parallel chat, which covered everything from tactics to sharing personal information within the group.

Another significant example of friendships of pleasure online is that of the connections made through common interests. Any common interest group will produce bonds between individuals who have shared passions; of the 235 questionnaire respondents who stated that an online friend had become part of their everyday life, almost a third mentioned the importance of shared interests in the creation and development of that friendship. Involvement in online fandom and the resulting 'pleasant friendships' was frequently mentioned:

It was easier to talk to these women because there was a common ground, we began with the show but ended up talking about everything. (Respondent 229)

It's a pleasurable thing to share information about the fandom. (Christine)

Research participants spoke of making casual friends online – more than friendships of utility, but less than friendships of virtue – in a wide range of online social networks, covering subjects as diverse as knitting, archery and weight loss.

Fröding and Peterson's statement that an online friendship cannot be a true friendship was discussed briefly in the above section. They further argue that the "highest form of friendship" (Aristotle's friendship of virtue) cannot be enjoyed in an entirely or predominantly virtual relationship, since it "requires a real life component" (2012, p. 205), although they acknowledge the potential for "lesser versions" of friendship. This argument is refuted by the experiences of some of the interviewees (discussed in Chapter Seven) and also by a number of questionnaire respondents. For example, Respondent 51 is from the USA, but her

best friend lives in England, and will be part of my life long term. This is a relationship that was established in 1996 and is still going strong. It is a same sex, platonic relationship, but is the most important one in my life. (Respondent 51)

This sentiment was not unusual:

One, from America, remains an "online" friend with regular chats on Skype [...] Despite having a number of "online friends" I'd never describe as "real", this is one of the few who has really crossed that boundary. (Respondent 411)

I am deeply attached to these women. [...] I may not see them every day, but I am closer to them than I am to my girlfriend who lives right here in the city in which I live. I grew because of my friendships with these women [...] and I never would have met them if it weren't for the internet. (Respondent 229)

Distance and lack of frequent face-to-face contact does not seem to affect the closeness or the importance of the virtual friendships enjoyed by the majority of the participants in this research.

The view which has been put forward by a number of researchers that online friendship may, at its best, fall within Aristotle's lower forms of friendship (namely those of utility and of pleasure), but cannot meet the criteria for the ultimate, 'perfect' friendship of virtue, does not appear to be supported by the results of this research. Examples of deep and genuine friendships which were created online and are predominantly conducted online were given by almost half of the interviewees; in most cases there had been at least one face-to-face meeting, but not in all, and for some participants meeting in person, while enjoyable and providing an added dimension to their mutual understanding, had made no significant difference to the depth of the friendship.

It is surprising, bearing in mind the developments in online social networking over the past decade, that recent research in the field of social psychology has given little credence to online communities as environments in which friendship, as it is defined and experienced offline, can develop and grow. David Beer suggested in 2008 that social networking sites may alter our "understandings and values of friendship" and that friendship will change "as it interfaces with such technologies" (p. 520); Fröding and Peterson concluded that "virtual friendship is what Aristotle might have described as a lower and less valuable form of social exchange." (2012, p. 206); while Amichai-Hamburger et al. (2013) stated that "It is difficult to see how on-line relating can have the same psychological significance as face-to-face relating, in terms of development and adjustments" (p. 37). It seems that these views, recent though they are, are further from the truth today than Parks and Floyd's 1996 statement that "the ultimate social impact of cyberspace will not flow from its exotic capabilities, but

rather from the fact that people are putting it to ordinary, even mundane, social uses.” (p. 94). Friendship has not changed since the development of online social spaces because, essentially, people have not changed. The medium through which we interact may be different, but friends are still the people we choose as our advisers, our companions and our confidants. Aristotle’s three types of friendship exist online, as they still exist offline. As Baym and boyd note, “Old practices and patterns continue to thrive in new media” (2012, p. 320). It seems that, whether we communicate face-to-face or via a screen, little has changed in 2,500 years.

4.7 Cautious Anonymity

Trust was mentioned earlier in this chapter as intrinsic to the development of friendship and social capital, and is therefore an important element in the forming of both weak and strong ties online. However, trust is rarely built quickly or easily between individuals or within groups, whether virtually or face-to-face, and most of the interviewees spoke of the need for caution online, particularly in the early stages of a relationship. Trust was not something which was specifically mentioned by any of the questionnaire respondents, although a level of trust could be extrapolated from comments regarding the quality of online friendships.

As is explored in Section 6.3.1, most of the interviewees spoke of their awareness of the need for discretion when posting to social networking sites. Although many of the most popular social networking sites encourage users to register using their real name, there is still an element of anonymity online which, while providing a sense of protection, can facilitate the perpetration of deception. Faye’s experience of a fellow member of a mothers’ group lying about having a sick child, and then about the child dying (Section 6.3.1.1) is, although quite extreme, unfortunately not unusual in online communities: the term ‘sockpuppet’ is commonly used to describe a false online identity used with the intention to deceive; for example in order to talk about the sockpuppet’s true identity for the purposes of eliciting sympathy or giving praise.

The use of filtering within social networking sites is one way that users can ensure a degree of control by limiting who can see their posts, and also deciding whose posts they see. The majority of the most popular social networking sites facilitate one or both of these types of filtering, although very few interviewees said that they took advantage of it. On

LiveJournal, Lydia used filtering to divide her Friends list into three groups, while Veronica had one filter, for close “real life friends”, which she used very rarely. Torsten, who was the only interviewee to use Google Plus for social interaction, made use of its ‘Circles’ feature to post to specific groups of friends. None of the interviewees actively used Facebook’s filtering tools, partly because it was seen as “a lot of work” (Daisy), but also because of a lack of trust in Facebook generally; instead, they tended to use unofficial or pre-Friending filtering, by simply not adding as Friends any individuals for whom they might feel a need to filter. This is contrary to McKnight et al.’s suggestion that “trust in the website may actually encourage users to take more precautionary privacy behaviors” (2011, p. 5), but supports Vitak et al.’s view that “the coordination costs [of using filters on Facebook] are most likely too high for the average user” (2011, p. 8).

Whitty and Joinson (2008) write that the anonymity of being online, together with the perception of similarity to other members of a community, can lead to high levels of self-disclosure, which they term being “hyperhonest” (p. 2); they further state that people are likely to disclose more information about themselves online than in “equivalent face-to-face encounters” (p. 11). This theory of being more honest in an anonymous setting is also known as “online disinhibition” (Barak & Suler, 2008), a lack of social inhibitions as a result of reduced or non-existent visible cues, such as body language, online (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2013; Bane et al., 2010; Barak & Hen, 2008; Chan & Cheng, 2004). Some interviewees gave examples of this, for example Faye, Henry and Lydia, who had each made strong friendships online, most of which had stayed online, for various reasons: Faye’s caring duties meant that she spent a lot of time at home and online, and she had started a business with her online best friend before they had actually met in person; Henry used podcasts and a Twitter account to indulge and share his passion for music, and had made very close friendships even within the limitations of Twitter’s 140-character messages; and Lydia, who was an (as-yet unpublished) author, had a LiveJournal Friends list who also served as draft-readers and critics for her work.

Despite this evidence of online disinhibition, the vast majority of interviewees, whether they had made a friend online or not, talked about a need for caution. In some cases they spoke about being cautious with regard to their own levels of openness and self-disclosure (Kendra, Minerva, Torsten), and in others they were more cautious about how others represented themselves (Declan, Hermione, Tanya). This may explain the desire to have at

least one face-to-face meeting with an online friend which was expressed by many of the interviewees, and the fact that, of the questionnaire respondents who had made a friend online, almost 97% stated that they had met an online friend in person. However, some interviewees stated that, although the face-to-face meeting had been desired and enjoyable, it had not made any difference to the strength or depth of their online friendship (Faye, Grace, Lydia).

Vitak et al. stated that “having in-person meetings with close friends is a significant predictor of perceptions of social provisions, providing support to decades of research on the importance of face-to-face interaction between strong ties.” (2011, p. 9). The “social provisions” which were focused on in their research were: support and assistance in any situation, advice in times of need, and affection and intimacy. These are some of the essential dimensions of friendship, as discussed in Section 4.5; Vitak et al.’s statement suggests that, even for those friends who were defined as ‘close’ by their research participants, regular face-to-face interaction was necessary to maintain the friendship. This view, as discussed in Section 4.6, is not an unusual one in the recent literature, with authors suggesting that online interactions cannot meet the established measures for friendship.

The respondents to the initial questionnaire provided a wide range of illustrations of their trust in online friends: going to stay in each other’s homes; starting a business together; providing support during serious illness; moving in together; and attending each other’s weddings. Despite these examples, it is clear from the interviews that there is also a degree of caution which is exercised in online interactions, and that the reassurance of a face-to-face meeting can help to cement an online friendship, even if the meeting is never repeated and the friendship continues purely online. It is possible that these attitudes were more prevalent in the interview participants in this research because the majority of them were aged over 35, with only four aged between 25 and 34. 25 of the interviewees were aged between 35 and 54, putting them in the age range which has been termed ‘Generation X’, and also in the category of “digital immigrants” (Prensky, 2001). However, despite their “immigrant” status, nearly all of the interviewees had been online for at least a decade: Peggy was the only exception, gaining access to the Internet in 2008. Over a third of the interviewees had been online since 1995 or earlier, and were experienced and confident users.

A possible explanation for the levels of caution evidenced by the interviewees is that, since they did not grow up with the Internet, they are using long-established face-to-face friendship creation methods, and therefore require an extra step in the relationship development process before committing to trust or friendship online.

4.8 A (Virtual) Room of One's Own

The idea of using Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929) as inspiration for a description of the Internet as a "separate, private, and safe space" (Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2004, p. 173) is not an original one (Bury, 2005; Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2011). However, it is a useful shorthand for the concept of the Internet as a place apart from everyday life, in which one can be and do whatever one wants. "On a deep psychological level, people often experience their computers and cyberspace as an extension of their minds and personalities – a "space" that reflects their tastes, attitudes, and interests" (Barak & Suler, 2008, p. 3).

In addition to the friendships which are created and developed online, a notable benefit of Internet use is the opportunity to find others who share the same interests. Examples given by participants in this research ranged from knitting to Scrabble, from archery to chickens, and from fandom to Welsh nationalism. Even where personal relationships are not created, individuals find support, understanding and a sense of companionship within a group of people who are passionate about the same things. This is particularly important where the interest in question cannot necessarily be shared with people locally, whether because it is something which is, to an extent, 'underground', such as fandom (Christine, Tanya, Veronica), or because there is a relatively small population of enthusiasts; for example, as in Isla's case, breeders of rare chickens.

As well as the opportunity to meet a group of like-minded individuals and by doing so to meet a need which could not easily be met offline, socialising online also allows individuals to express an aspect of their personality where they are unable or unwilling to do so in their everyday life. This could be something negative or undertaken for nefarious purposes, as in Declan's example of "middle-aged men pretending to be little girls" or as part of an "online romance scam" (Whitty & Buchanan, 2012). For most people, however, the Internet simply provides a chance to explore a new or usually-hidden personality trait which they find difficult to show in their everyday lives. "[T]hose who possess stigmatized identities and

those who feel that important self-aspects are constrained by their current roles and relationships will be motivated to seek out others who share or will be accepting of these aspects of one's identity." (McKenna & Bargh, 1999, p. 253): examples given by McKenna and Bargh of "stigmatized identities" are "non-mainstream sexual preferences [and] people with epilepsy" (p. 253); while it is to be hoped that these are less of a stigma in Britain today, it is still not unusual for people to wish to hide, or at least not to publicise, certain beliefs or preferences within their everyday lives.

A common theme in the literature is that of the opportunity to exhibit one's "real self", or "true self" in an online forum (McKenna et al., 2002; Whitty & Joinson, 2008). McKenna et al. believed that those individuals who are more able to exhibit their "real self" online are more likely to form close relationships there. Those with more reasons for not showing that self in everyday circumstances (e.g. disability or shyness) are more likely to use the anonymity of the Internet in order to do so. Grace spoke of the importance of being able to express the aspects of her personality which were not part of her everyday roles as wife and mother; Bella and Veronica both spoke of the difficulty that they sometimes had in socialising in person, due to health problems, and how being able to have a social life online was even more important at those times.

While the anonymity of online communities and social networking sites can encourage higher levels of self-disclosure and thus, perhaps, lead to the development of trust and friendship, the asynchronicity of much online communication appears to serve to provide a sense of security for many people. A number of the interviewees mentioned a dislike of using the telephone, even to contact very good friends, and the advantage they found in being able to contact people using email or personal messages on Facebook or LiveJournal. Bella and Faye, though they both disliked using the telephone in itself, also said that it felt like an intrusion to telephone people:

Online you're not asking people to put everything down, and stop and listen to you right then. So it feels less demanding. (Bella)

Olivia and Veronica both said that they had never liked using the telephone to call friends, even before having access to social networking sites, while Isla felt that her Asperger Syndrome meant that her verbal communication was sometimes "quite staccato" and that she was therefore more able to be herself when she was writing an email or forum post.

Minerva was quite the opposite, preferring to use the telephone rather than write an email. She met her made-online friend via a purchase on eBay and they exchanged emails for about a month before their interaction moved to the telephone; their contact is now exclusively by telephone, apart from a few meetings which were not particularly successful. She was quite certain that, had their interaction not moved to the telephone, the friendship would not have continued.

My interest would definitely have waned. Because I find email a bit of a pain.
(Minerva)

Unlike many of the interviewees, and particularly those who did not like to use the telephone, Minerva felt that she was less able to put herself across in text, unless it was handwritten, and preferred synchronous communication.

While the Internet can be conceptualised as ‘a virtual room of one’s own’ in which traits can be explored and shared with others, it can also be a place within which changes can occur and subsequently influence individuals’ everyday lives. Just as online friends can be integrated into offline social circles, the effects of involvement in an online friendship or community can affect an individual’s offline behaviour or attitudes. Lydia said that, over time, meeting her online friends despite her shyness had made it easier for her to meet new people in her everyday life. Grace felt that her online friendships had given her a window into the world that she would not otherwise have had:

what I feel like is they expand your world. [...] I had gained all these insights into different places in the world through all these people, and different ways of life.
(Grace)

Isla said that her life had become significantly easier since going online:

particularly as somebody with Asperger’s, having the facility of online communication is *wonderful*. [...] It’s changed the world for me, to be honest. That sounds very dramatic, but it has, and it’s actually helping my verbal communication as well. (Isla)

She added that, in addition to having made it easier to run her business, and introducing her to people she would not otherwise have met, she believed that there were wider positive implications of Internet use and socialising online which were often not reported in the mainstream media:

Actually, that was one of the reasons why I responded to your survey, because there's so much-- or seems to be so much [Internet] bashing, I wanted to stand up and say, "Look, for me, this has changed my life in hugely valued ways." And I think that's the same for a lot of people, certainly with Asperger's – with autism as well. I know from some of the students that I deal with that's the case. So yes, more and more, I think we ought to make far more use of it than we do already. (Isla)

4.9 Summary

This chapter reviewed some of the principal themes which emerged from the online questionnaires and face-to-face interviews; although they are not all directly related to the central question or aims of this research, they provide a deeper understanding of the ways in which the Internet has affected the way that we experience friendship.

There is some evidence that the age range which is primarily represented in this research is significantly less researched in terms of their online interactions than are young (under 25) or older (over 60) adults. As the generation known as 'Generation X', 30-55 year olds have also been termed "digital immigrants" (Prensky, 2001), since they grew up before the Internet was widely available and have had to adapt to the new social technologies. This is a controversial view, particularly since many 'Gen Xers' were and are instrumental in the development of those technologies. The subsequent generation (current 10-30 year olds), who have been dubbed the 'Millennials'⁹, were described by Prensky as "digital natives", and there is an argument to be made that this is true; they grew up in a society where computers and mobile phones were becoming ubiquitous and social networking online was increasingly common. However, it is the current generation, sometimes called Generation Z (Horowitz, 2012, n.p.), born since around 2004, and, to a greater extent, the next generation after them, who can more accurately be considered digital natives; the vast majority of them will have grown up with parents who are active Internet users. They will be, for want of a better term, second-generation digital immigrants.

The results of this research illustrate the ways in which Internet users in the second decade of the 21st century use social networking sites to develop or to augment friendships. While

9 The term "Millennials" is credited to William Strauss and Neil Howe (Horowitz, 2012, n.p.), who used the term in their 1992 book *Generations: The history of America's future, 1584 to 2069*. Strauss and Howe used 1982 and 2004 as the start and end birth years for the Millennial Generation, although other authors and organisations around the world use slightly different ranges.

it is the case that online friends are often integrated into each other's everyday lives, by meeting family and friends, becoming part of a wider offline social network, or just by having regular meetings, it is also true, and perhaps more frequently the case, that made-offline friendships are maintained and sustained using social networking sites. Despite this interaction between the "digital and physical" (Jurgenson, 2012, n.p.), users retain a clear sense of the difference between the modes of contact.

Although the impact of time spent in online communities and social networking sites upon individuals' levels of social capital has been well researched over the past decade or so (Best & Krueger, 2006; Steinfield et al., 2008; Vitak et al., 2011; Wellman et al., 2001; Williams, 2006), there has been little exploration of the connection between friendship levels (whether online or offline) and individual social capital. In Section 4.5, established measures of friendship and social capital were considered and a set of dimensions created within which the two groups of measures were brought together. These dimensions allow the direct comparison of the elements which result in high levels of friendship and social capital, and thus assist in evaluating the degree of 'direct social capital' experienced by an individual as a result of their dyadic or group friendships.

A number of benefits, over and above the establishment of close friendships, can be experienced by participants in online communities and social networking sites, including the opportunity to explore a usually-hidden aspect of personality, the chance to be part of a group of like-minded individuals, and the ability to show one's "true self". For some interviewees, their online experiences had led to significant changes in their everyday life, whether it was a new business enterprise or a chance to overcome personal barriers of low confidence or health issues.

Although the new social tools and technologies which are available today have changed the ways in which people can make new friends, and keep in touch with existing ones, the basic elements of friendship have not essentially changed since Aristotle's time. His division of friendships into the categories of utility, pleasure and virtue or perfection still has resonance today, and is echoed in the broad categories mentioned by most of the interviewees: acquaintances and casual friends; 'real' friends; and best friends. Ultimately, the theory of Aristotelian friendship online is an illustration of the concept which has been evident throughout this research: that very little in the way that we interact with others, whether it is

at work, in our homes, or on Facebook, has changed. What has changed, for many, is the medium through which our social interactions occur: local groups and clubs have given way to online communities with an international membership; the telephone and postal service have given way to instant messages and emails; and meeting up to exchange news has given way to Facebook updates.

There is no indication from the data gathered for this research that even the most active of users wishes to dispense with face-to-face interaction altogether: however, there is no doubt that the ability to socialise online has not only provided the opportunity to meet and befriend a wide variety of people, but also to renew, maintain and develop existing friendships and family relationships which might otherwise have waned.

The next three chapters report the results of the two data collection phases: the initial, quantitative online questionnaire and the subsequent qualitative, face-to-face interviews. The data summarised in those chapters were collected in order to answer the central research question: To what extent does regular online interaction affect participants' offline, everyday social networks? The quantitative data, summarised in Chapter Five, was primarily collected in order to facilitate the selection of interview participants, although it provides an interesting overview of the online behaviour of the respondents. Chapters Six and Seven focus on the results of the interviews, addressing the themes which emerged and are related to the research objectives: whether friendships are created online; whether the type of social networking site used affects online friendships; how online friendships compare to offline friendships; and whether online friendships are integrated into participants' everyday, face-to-face social networks.

Chapter Five

Identification and Characteristics of the Population

This chapter focuses on the results of the primary phase of the data collection process; the online questionnaire. The respondents to the questionnaire formed the population from which the sample for the second, qualitative phase of the research was selected. The questionnaires collected demographic data, as well as background information about respondents' use of the Internet and the extent of their online social activity. The questionnaire was predominantly quantitative, though it contained one open question, the responses to which are discussed in Section 5.15.

Questionnaire respondents are identified only by the unique response ID number which was generated by the SurveyGizmo website, preceded by the letter 'R'.

5.1 Data Analysis

The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 20, and Microsoft's Excel spreadsheet package. SurveyGizmo allows direct export of survey data to both SPSS and Excel; for this research, the questionnaire responses were initially exported to Excel in order to facilitate minor editing of the data where required (see Sections 5.3.3 and 5.7 below).

SPSS enabled fast and accurate analysis of what was a fairly large data set. No complex statistical analyses were required, but frequency counts and cross-tabulation helped to purposefully select the respondents who would be invited to take part in the qualitative interviews.

5.2 Response Rate

433 completed responses were received. An additional 31 partial responses were recorded by the SurveyGizmo site, but no data from these questionnaires were downloaded or examined.

5.3 About the Questionnaire Respondents

The first section of the questionnaire asked for basic demographic data – gender, age and location.

5.3.1 Gender

Of the 433 respondents who completed the questionnaire, only one (R169) failed to provide an answer to this question. However, it was clear from the answers given to later questions that she was female. Including R169, 316 (73%) of the respondents were female, 108 (25%) were male, and the remaining nine identified as transgender, genderqueer, genderless, or chose not to state a gender.

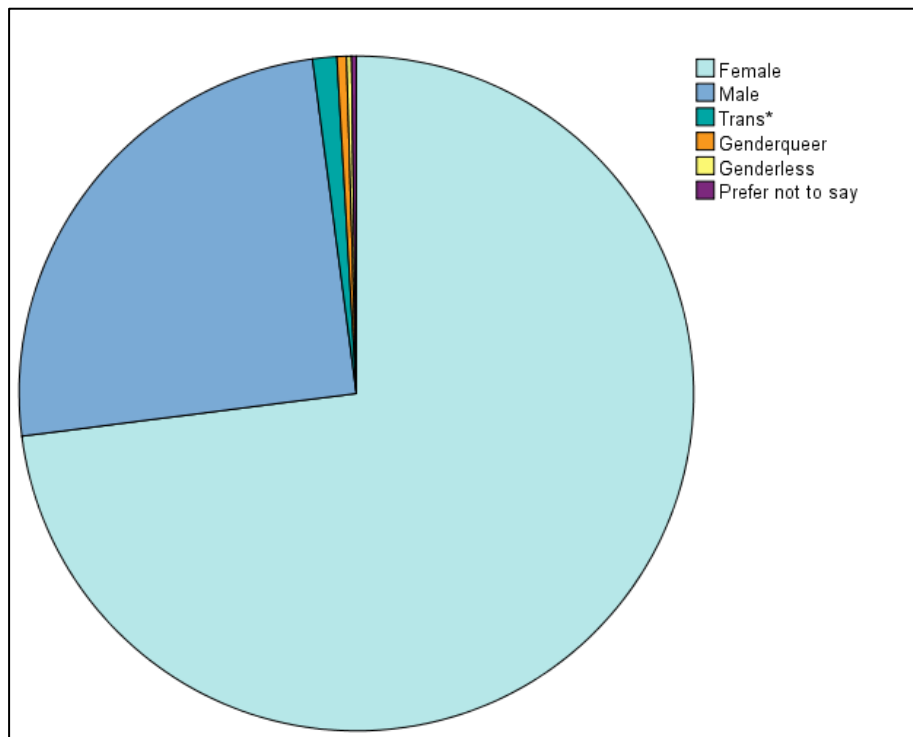


Figure 3 : Gender of respondents

The gender split in this study means that it is difficult to draw any statistically significant conclusions as a result of correlating specific questionnaire answers with respondents' gender.

5.3.2 Age range

The majority of respondents were in the 25-44 age range, with almost 60% in that group. 30 (7%) were aged between 18 and 24, and only 9 were over 65.

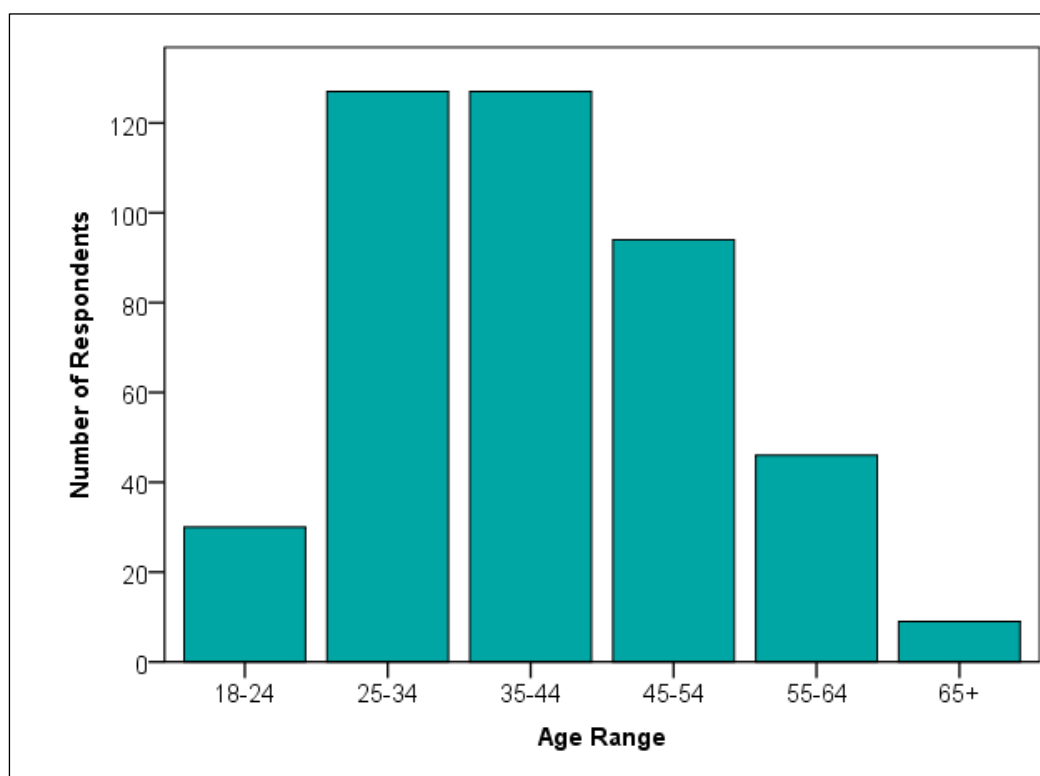


Figure 4 : Age range of respondents

The overall gender split was quite accurately reflected within the age groups. The three largest age groups (25-34, 35-44 and 45-54) were, collectively, 73.2% female.

5.3.3 Country of residence

60% of respondents were resident in the UK. This was unsurprising, since the majority of survey invitations were posted on UK-based websites or sent by UK-based individuals to their contacts. Respondents from the United States made up almost 69% of the remainder.

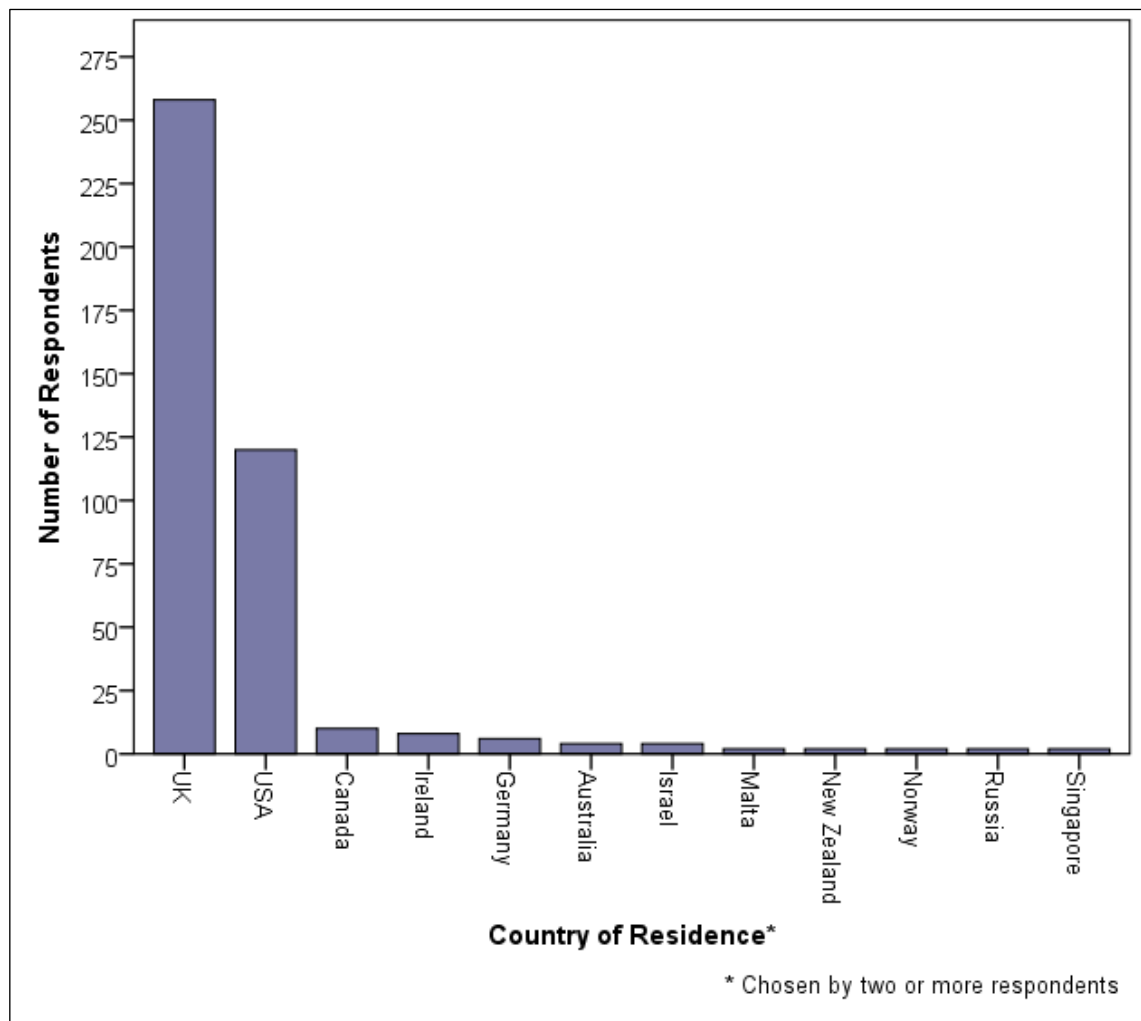


Figure 5 : Location of respondents

Some of the data resulting from this question had to be standardised or ‘cleaned’ in order to facilitate its analysis. In order to avoid a lengthy checklist or drop-down box, it was created as a free-text box, and, as was expected, the answers were not consistent: for example, Wales was variously given as “Cymru”, “Wales”, “wales”, “Wales UK”, and “wales uk”. Answers were edited as necessary in order to standardise spelling and capitalisation.

The countries were systematised as appropriate: e.g. England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland were all classed as “UK”).

It is difficult to make any significant observations regarding this data: examining the differences between discrete answers by comparing the locations of respondents is not worthwhile, due to the discrepancy between the top two identified locations and the rest. Over 87% of respondents came from the UK and USA, with 258 and 120

respondents respectively. The third most commonly-represented country was Canada, with just 10 respondents; therefore there are few useful insights to be gained by comparing the majority of these data points.

5.4 Length of access to the Internet

A third of questionnaire respondents stated that they had had access to the Internet since before 1995. In all, 80% of the respondents had gone online before 2000.

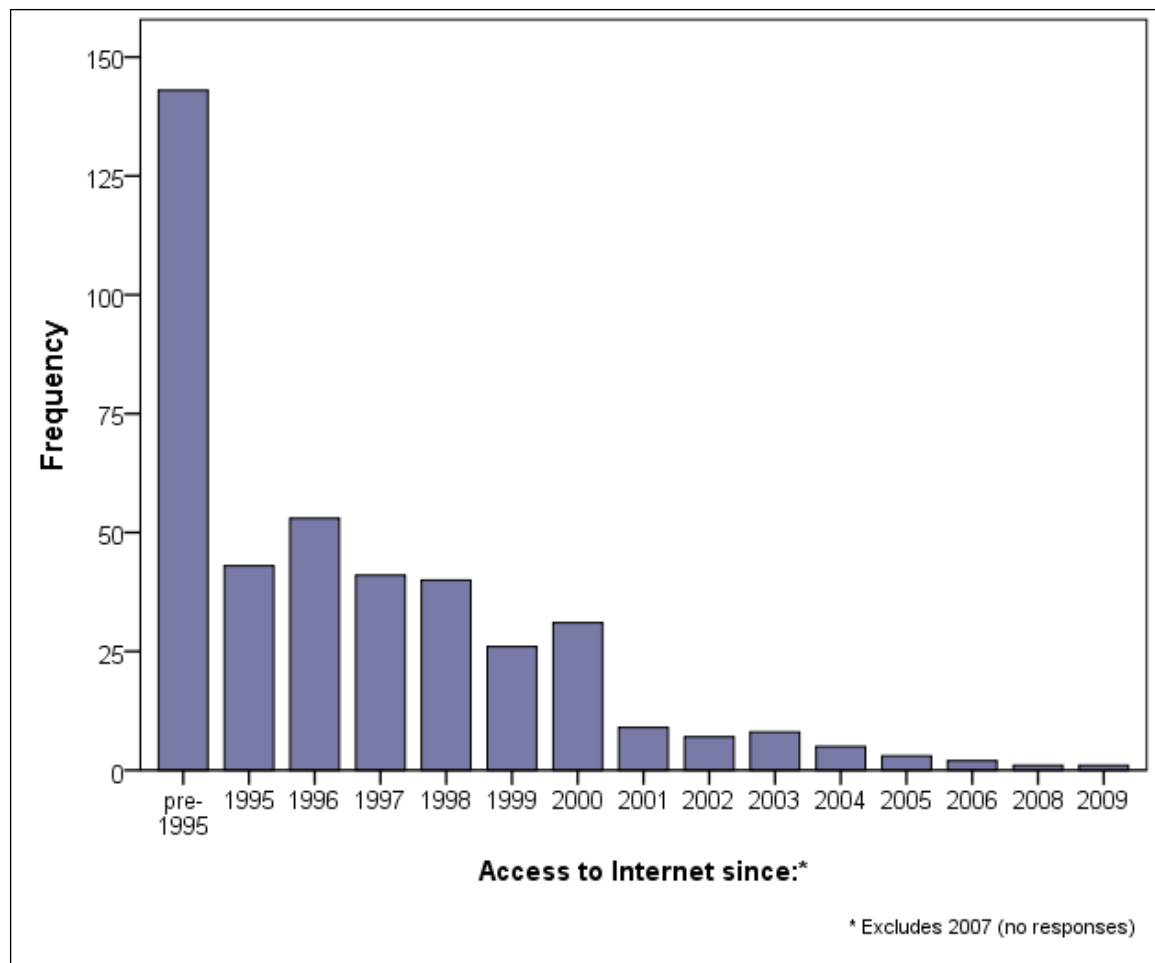


Figure 6 : Length of access to the Internet

Twenty people did not answer this question: this could be because they did not know, or simply as a way to speed up the questionnaire, although this seems unlikely since it was so early in the process.

Historically, men have been early adopters of technology such as the Internet (Wajcman, 2011, p. 267), though this no longer appears to be the case. Again, the overall gender split

is broadly reflected here: of those who had been online since before 1995, 68% were female and 31% male.

Cross-tabulating the length of time that respondents had been online with their age ranges resulted in few surprises. The majority of 18-24 year-olds went online between 1997 and 2000, and over 80% of those aged between 35 and 44 had been online since before 1998.

InternetSince * Age Crosstabulation								
Count		Age						Total
		18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	
InternetSince	pre-1995	0	21	55	45	20	2	143
	1995	1	15	10	6	10	1	43
	1996	2	26	14	9	2	0	53
	1997	6	13	10	8	2	2	41
	1998	5	15	13	4	3	0	40
	1999	5	7	6	5	3	0	26
	2000	3	14	7	5	0	2	31
	2001	0	3	4	2	0	0	9
	2002	4	2	0	1	0	0	7
	2003	0	3	1	3	0	1	8
	2004	2	1	1	1	0	0	5
	2005	1	0	2	0	0	0	3
	2006	0	2	0	0	0	0	2
	2008	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
	2009	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Total		29	123	124	89	40	8	413

Table 3 : Length of access to the internet, split by age group

Only eight of those aged over 65 answered this question, so it is not possible to make any assumptions regarding use of the Internet by seniors.

5.5 Hours spent online

Question 5 asked respondents to estimate the amount of time they spent online in an average week, not including the time when they were connected to the Internet but not actively using it (for example when downloading files).

The questionnaire respondents were generally quite heavy users in terms of the time they spent online. More than two-thirds estimated that they spent more than 20 hours online in an average week.

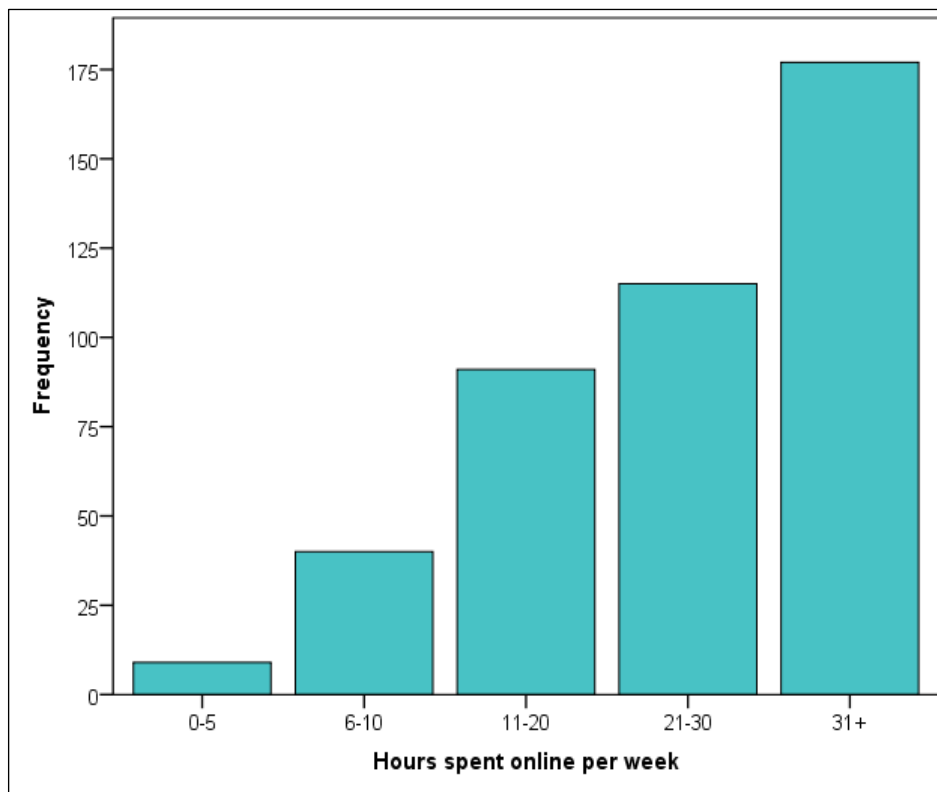


Figure 7 : Hours spent online per week

There was no particular difference between genders when it came to the amount of time spent online. The majority of all respondents, regardless of gender, spent more than 20 hours per week online, on average. Approximately 2% of female and male respondents spent 5 hours or fewer online.

Age did not appear to have any relevance to the number of hours that respondents spent online in an average week. Only nine respondents indicated that they spent five hours or fewer online; of these, none were aged 18-24 or over 65. More than 67% of respondents spent more than 21 hours online, and these figures were fairly evenly split across the age groups, although no-one aged over 65 claimed to spend more than 31 hours on the Internet.

As expected, these figures were reflected within different geographical locations. 35% of UK respondents and 48% of US respondents reporting spending 31 or more hours online, on average, per week.

It is difficult to identify any patterns of correlation between the length of time individuals had had access to the Internet and the time that they spent online, although more than 50%

of those who had had access since before 1995 spent 31 or more hours online per week, on average.

5.6 Sample groups

As outlined in Section 3.6.1, invitations to complete the questionnaire were distributed in a variety of online locations by several different people. Respondents were asked, both in the introductory messages and in the questionnaire itself, to share the link to the website, in an attempt to encourage a snowball effect.

SurveyGizmo allows the creation of a number of different URLs leading to the same survey, and this facility was used to monitor the snowballing effect and to see results for the different sample groups. Table 4 below shows where each of the individual links were initially posted, and how they were disseminated, if known.

dw1	Dreamwidth account.
F2f	Posted on Twitter, and also used in conjunction with the 'l4m' link.
F2f2	Sent to contacts made at PhD conference.
fb1	Individual's Facebook page – posted three times over two weeks.
fl1	Link was given to two individuals. Passed to friends and family.
flk1	Posted to Flickr (as an image).
jm1	Posted to individual's Facebook page and emailed to family members.
js1	Forwarded by individual by email.
l4m	Used for second phase of data collection, asking specifically for male participants. Posted on Twitter, Facebook, an alumni list for another university, and to individuals' personal email contacts.
lis1	Posted on Twitter by the LIS Research Coalition
lj1	LiveJournal account.
lj2	LiveJournal account.
lj3	LiveJournal account.
lj4	LiveJournal account.
sc1	Posted to individual's Twitter feed, Facebook page and to a professional list
ts1	Email list for fans of an off-the-air television show.
wlr1	Weight Loss Resources website – 'Off Topic' forum.
ww1	Email list for social side of a Freecycle group.
xs1	Email list for cross stitchers.

Table 4 : List of sample group codes

Table 5 shows the responses received for each of the individual links.

SampleGroup					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	l4m	67	15.5	15.5	15.5
	lj1	47	10.9	10.9	26.3
	fl1	43	9.9	9.9	36.3
	F2f	41	9.5	9.5	45.7
	wlr1	41	9.5	9.5	55.2
	ts1	31	7.2	7.2	62.4
	dw1	26	6.0	6.0	68.4
	F2f2	21	4.8	4.8	73.2
	ww1	21	4.8	4.8	78.1
	lj3	18	4.2	4.2	82.2
	sc1	18	4.2	4.2	86.4
	fb1	13	3.0	3.0	89.4
	lis1	13	3.0	3.0	92.4
	lj4	9	2.1	2.1	94.5
	xs1	8	1.8	1.8	96.3
	lj2	6	1.4	1.4	97.7
	jm1	5	1.2	1.2	98.8
	flk1	3	.7	.7	99.5
	js1	2	.5	.5	100.0
	Total	433	100.0	100.0	

Table 5 : Responses for each sample group

The most successful link, in terms of the number of respondents, resulted in just over 15% of the total responses (link *l4m*). This was the link which was sent during the second phase of the data collection, specifically asking for male respondents. This link was sent via personal emails, Twitter and Facebook, as well as being posted on the alumni list of another university and on an archery forum. Not all responses to this second call for respondents were male: 21 of 67 were female.

Link *lj1* was posted to a blog on LiveJournal by an active blogger who is involved in several fan communities, is an academic, and who has a very active online and offline social presence. Her endorsement of the research probably had a significant impact on the number of responses.

fl1 was a link given to two individuals, both aged 18 at the time. It was hoped that their sample group would increase the number of respondents in the 18-24 age group, but only 7 of the 43 respondents using this link were in that range.

wlr was a link posted to the Weight Loss Resources website. This site is an online weight loss site which has very active member forums. A message was posted on the Off Topic discussion board, and there was an almost-instant response: the first thirty completed questionnaires from WLR were received within four hours. The forums on a site such as this are by definition very supportive and have a strong community feel, and the Off Topic forums in particular tend to be very active.

At the other end of the scale are links *js1* and *flk1*. *js1* was a link used by an individual who took part in the pilot of the questionnaire and was sent out by her via email; unfortunately only two responses were received. *flk1* was posted to Flickr by a heavy user of that site. It was posted as an image and he did not anticipate many responses; it was not a surprise that only three people used that link.

Table 6 below shows a cross-tabulation comparing the sample groups and the gender of the respondents. As was anticipated, the only sample group which had more male than female respondents was the *l4m* group, which was disseminated with the specific aim of garnering more men for the study.

SampleGroup * Gender Crosstabulation								
Count								
		Gender						Total
		Female	Male	Trans*	Genderqueer	Genderless	Prefer not to say	
SampleGroup	l4m	21	46	0	0	0	0	67
	lj1	44	1	1	1	0	0	47
	fl1	27	11	3	1	1	0	43
	F2f	27	13	1	0	0	0	41
	wlr1	37	4	0	0	0	0	41
	ts1	30	1	0	0	0	0	31
	dw1	23	2	0	0	0	1	26
	F2f2	12	9	0	0	0	0	21
	ww1	15	6	0	0	0	0	21
	lj3	18	0	0	0	0	0	18
	sc1	14	4	0	0	0	0	18
	fb1	10	3	0	0	0	0	13
	lis1	11	2	0	0	0	0	13
	lj4	9	0	0	0	0	0	9
	xs1	7	1	0	0	0	0	8
	lj2	6	0	0	0	0	0	6
	jm1	3	2	0	0	0	0	5
	flk1	2	1	0	0	0	0	3
	js1	0	2	0	0	0	0	2
Total		316	108	5	2	1	1	433

Table 6 : Sample groups split by gender

The only country to be represented in every sample group was the UK.

5.7 Where the Invitation was Seen

Question 6 asked respondents where they had seen the survey invitation. The URLs used for each sample group do not necessarily correlate with where the survey invitation was seen. For example, an individual could have reposted a link, originally seen on Weight Loss Resources, on her Facebook page. Anyone using that link would therefore show within the sample group *wlr1*, while actually having seen the invitation on Facebook, and perhaps not having anything to do with the WLR website. As with Question 3 (see Section 5.3.3) this question was created as a free text box and therefore the responses had to be standardised to ensure consistency of spelling and capitalisation.

Appendix L shows a cross-tabulation between the locations in which the questionnaire invitations were seen, and the sample group links used by respondents to access the questionnaire.

Where seen					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	LiveJournal	108	24.9	24.9	24.9
	Twitter	104	24.0	24.0	49.0
	Facebook	51	11.8	11.8	60.7
	Weight Loss Resources	40	9.2	9.2	70.0
	Mailing list	23	5.3	5.3	75.3
	Friend or relative	21	4.8	4.8	80.1
	By email	20	4.6	4.6	84.8
	West Wales Coast Cafe list	16	3.7	3.7	88.5
	Archery Interchange	9	2.1	2.1	90.5
	Dreamwidth	9	2.1	2.1	92.6
	LJ comm	8	1.8	1.8	94.5
	Researcher	8	1.8	1.8	96.3
	Sentinel UK list	7	1.6	1.6	97.9
	UK Cross Stitch list	7	1.6	1.6	99.5
	Google+	2	.5	.5	100.0
	Total	433	100.0	100.0	

Table 7 : Where the invitation was seen

The two most common answers to Question 6, by a considerable margin, were ‘LiveJournal’ and ‘Twitter’. The number of questionnaire responses which were received from the four LiveJournal sample group links added up to 80, whereas 108 respondents stated that they had in fact seen the invitation on LiveJournal. However, there is significant crossover between LiveJournal and Dreamwidth, another social blogging site, which may account for the higher figure here. LiveJournal can be problematic in terms of service levels and sudden changes to its functionality, and many users, particularly within fandom, have created additional accounts with Dreamwidth, which is based on LiveJournal’s code and is therefore familiar, and which allows cross-posting between the sites. This could account for the high LiveJournal figure shown in Table 7 above, and also for the fact that nine respondents stated that they had seen the invitation on Dreamwidth, while 26 questionnaires had been answered via the Dreamwidth sample group URL.

Brief descriptions of some of the sites mentioned below are given in Section 5.9.2.

5.7.1 LiveJournal

73 respondents had used the four LiveJournal sample group links (*lj1*, *lj2*, *lj3* and *lj4*) and 20 had used the Dreamwidth link (*dw1*). Fifteen had used the link *ts1*, which was originally sent to Sentinel-UK, a Yahoo Groups email list for UK-based fans of an American television show; it is assumed that it had been reposted on a LiveJournal page by one of that list's members.

Answers stating that the invitation had been seen on a LiveJournal community ('LJ comm' in Table 7 above) were analysed separately from this data; each of the eight respondents who said that they had seen it on a community had named the same one. From the context, it appears that the call for research participants had been reposted from either a mailing list or from an individual's journal, and since it could not be determined which, the data was recorded separately.

5.7.2 Twitter

It is more difficult to compare the figure for Twitter to the sample group data, since only one of the sample group links was solely disseminated via Twitter (*lis1*, posted on Twitter by the Library and Information Science Research Coalition). At least four of the other URLs were sent out via Twitter, in addition to other locations.

5.7.3 Facebook

The third most common site on which respondents had seen the questionnaire invitation was Facebook. As with Twitter, it is difficult to correlate this result with the sample group links used to answer the questionnaire, although 100% of the users of link *fb1*, which was posted on an individual's Facebook page on three separate occasions, had seen the invitation there. One respondent who used the Weight Loss Resources link (*wlr1*) had seen the invitation on Facebook, as had one respondent using a LiveJournal link (*lj3*). It is possible that the links were given specifically to these individuals, though it is more likely that, as requested, respondents reposted the invitation on their Facebook Wall.

Four respondents who saw the invitation on Facebook used the link which was allocated to the West Wales Coast Café, the Yahoo Group mailing list which is connected to the local Freecycle group; from comments made by one of the respondents, it seems that the link was reposted on a related, closed, group on Facebook.

5.7.4 Mailing lists

The category ‘Mailing list’ excludes those email lists which were part of the original dissemination process (West Wales Coast Café, Sentinel-UK, and another Yahoo Groups list, UK Cross Stitch).

Of the 23, 19 stated that they had seen it on a list for alumni of a different university; it had been posted there by another research participant. Three had seen it on a professional list, posted by one of the individuals who had disseminated the initial invitations, and one respondent simply answered, “Mailing list” without giving further detail (R266).

These figures correlate with the sample group links which were used by the respondents. The 19 respondents who belonged to the alumni list used the *F2f* link which had been posted on the list; none of them had seen it anywhere else. The three who had seen it on a professional list used the *scI* link, which had been disseminated in a variety of locations online. The remaining one used the *flI* link which was shared in a variety of ways by two individuals, both aged 18 at the time. This respondent (R266) was the only user of that link to state that she had seen the invitation on a mailing list, which suggests that she might have misidentified the location when completing this question. The other respondents who used the *flI* link had variously seen the invitation on Twitter, Facebook, via a friend or relative, by email and directly from the researcher, but there is no indication from those answers that it had been posted to a mailing list.

5.7.5 Friend or relative

A total of 21 people had received the invitation from someone whom they identified as a friend or family member.

If someone used the phrase “email from a friend” then they were included in this category. However, if they named an individual, e.g. “Joe Bloggs emailed it to me” that respondent was included in the ‘By email’ category, since it not possible to know in what capacity ‘Joe Bloggs’ had sent it: as a colleague, friend or casual email contact.

Five of the respondents, all of whom were male, used the *l4m* sample group link and were therefore invited after the second call for participants was sent out. Eight used the *fl1* link. The remainder were spread between *F2f* (posted on Twitter and sent out to some individual respondents), *ww1* (posted to the West Wales Coast Café), *sc1* (sent out by an individual in a variety of different locations), *xs1* (sent to the UK Cross Stitch list), *jm1* (posted on Facebook and sent out by email), *flk1* (posted on Flickr), and *js1* (sent to personal contacts by email).

5.7.6 By email

Twenty respondents had received the invitation by email, ten of whom were male, nine were female and one was genderqueer. As with those who had been told of the research by friends or relatives, this group of respondents had used various different sample group links to access the questionnaire: *l4m*, *fl1*, *F2f*, *sc1* (which was the most frequently-used for this group, with eight respondents using it), *jm1* and *js1*. Other links used were *lj1*, which was posted on a LiveJournal account and was used by a high number of respondents, and *lis1*, which was posted on Twitter by the LIS Research Coalition; both of these links were presumably forwarded on via email by someone who had seen the original message.

These two groups of respondents – those contacted by a friend or relative and those who had received the invitation by email – appear to be the most successful groups with regard to the snowballing of the questionnaire invitations. Without asking the individual respondents there is no way to know at what ‘remove’ they had received the invitation, i.e. whether they had received it directly from someone who had seen or disseminated the message, or whether there was another intermediary between that stage and their involvement.

5.7.7 Dreamwidth

The data for Dreamwidth has been discussed briefly above. The *dw1* link, which was initially distributed on one individual's Dreamwidth page, was used by 26 respondents. Nine respondents stated that they had seen the invitation on Dreamwidth, and of those only six used the *dw1* link: the remaining three used the *lj4* link, which had been given to a LiveJournal user to post on her personal journal.

The Dreamwidth user who originally posted the *dw1* link has a mirror blog on LiveJournal: of the six respondents who had seen the invitation on Dreamwidth and had used the *dw1* link, two specified her blog in their answer; the remainder simply said that they had seen it on the site. The LiveJournal user to whom the *lj4* link was allocated also has blogs at both sites: nine respondents used that link, three of whom had seen the invitation on Dreamwidth.

5.7.8 Archery Interchange

Of the nine respondents who had seen the invitation on Archery Interchange, eight were male. All nine used the *l4m* link, which was posted to the site during the second phase of data collection, in which men were specifically asked to take part. There is no indication or suggestion that Archery Interchange is a predominantly male forum, although it appears to be more focused on the exchange of information than on socialising: however, the invitation which was posted there did specifically ask for men to complete the questionnaire.

5.7.9 LiveJournal community

As noted earlier, respondents who stated that they had seen the invitation on a LiveJournal community were categorised separately from those who had seen it on an individual's journal. Of the eight respondents who are in this category, all used the *ts1* link which was originally sent to the Sentinel-UK email list.

From the answers given to Question 6, it seems that the invitation sent to Sentinel-UK had been reposted both in a LiveJournal community which aggregates posts relating to the fandom, and in the journal of an individual who is involved in the fandom.

5.7.10 UK Cross Stitch email list

Seven respondents had seen the invitation on this list, all of whom had used the *xs/* link included in the original invitation email. All seven were female, which is not surprising in a community based around a hobby which is predominantly enjoyed by women; there are active members of the UKCS list who are men, but they are very much in the minority.

One additional, male, respondent used the *xs/* link; he had received it from a friend.

5.7.11 Google+

The respondents who saw the invitation on Google+, both of whom were male, also used the *l4m* link; there was no indication in those questionnaires of who had posted the invitation or whether it was done via personal messages or in a group.

5.7.12 Gender differences in response levels

Of the 15 different locations in which respondents had seen the invitation to participate, four were named by more men than women (see Table 8 below): from a friend or relative, by email, Archery Interchange and Google+.

Where seen * Gender Crosstabulation								
Count		Gender						Total
		Female	Male	Trans*	Genderqueer	Genderless	Prefer not to say	
Where seen	LiveJournal	104	3	1	0	0	0	108
	Twitter	66	38	0	0	0	0	104
	Facebook	31	16	2	1	1	0	51
	Weight Loss Resources	36	4	0	0	0	0	40
	Mailing list	17	5	1	0	0	0	23
	Friend or relative	6	14	1	0	0	0	21
	By email	9	10	0	1	0	0	20
	West Wales Coast Cafe list	11	5	0	0	0	0	16
	Archery Interchange	1	8	0	0	0	0	9
	Dreamwidth	8	0	0	0	0	1	9
	LJ comm	7	1	0	0	0	0	8
	Researcher	6	2	0	0	0	0	8
	Sentinel UK list	7	0	0	0	0	0	7
	UK Cross Stitch list	7	0	0	0	0	0	7
	Google+	0	2	0	0	0	0	2
Total		316	108	5	2	1	1	433

Table 8 : Where the invitation was seen, split by respondents' gender

The respondents who had seen the invitation on Archery Interchange and Google+ had all been approached during the second phase of data collection and had used the *l4m* link to access the questionnaire, while those who had received the invitation by email or directly from a friend or relative used a variety of sample group links. These results may indicate that men are more likely to take part in research if they are invited directly or perhaps if they have a relationship, whether personal or professional, with the person who asks them to participate.

5.8 Number of Online Social Network Memberships

There was a wide range of responses to the question asking for information regarding membership of online communities or social networks (hereafter referred to as OSNs).

One respondent (R415) stated that he was not a member of any OSNs at all, and said that he had received the web link from a friend. Although he did not list any OSNs, he answered ‘Yes’ to Question 8, which asked, “Have you ever become friends with someone whom you originally met online?”. He also stated that he had had more than three face-to-face meetings with online friends, and that at least one online friend had become a regular part of his everyday life. Unfortunately, R415 did not volunteer to be interviewed so it was not possible to follow up these seeming inconsistencies.

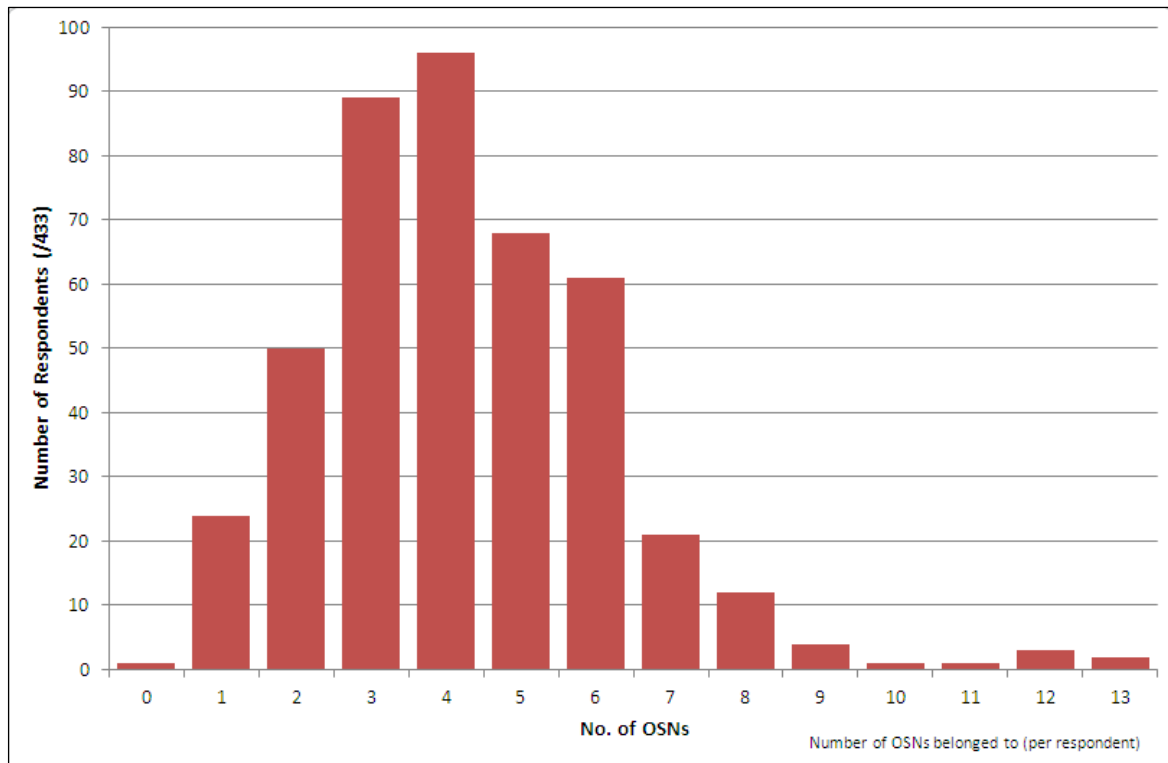


Figure 8 : Number of OSN memberships per respondent

The number of OSNs to which individual respondents belonged ranged from zero to 13; the majority listed between two and six. The most common answer, or mode, for this question was four, with 96 respondents. The average of the responses was 4.3.

There are a few interesting statistics when examining the gender split within the responses to this question: the gender ratios are fairly stable (roughly 75% female, 25% male) until the higher numbers of OSN memberships. Of the 12 respondents who stated they were members of eight online social networks, four were female, seven were male, and one was transgender. Of those who belonged to nine social networks, three were male and one female. However, the respondents with the highest OSN membership were all female.

In terms of representation across all genders, the most common answer was ‘two’.

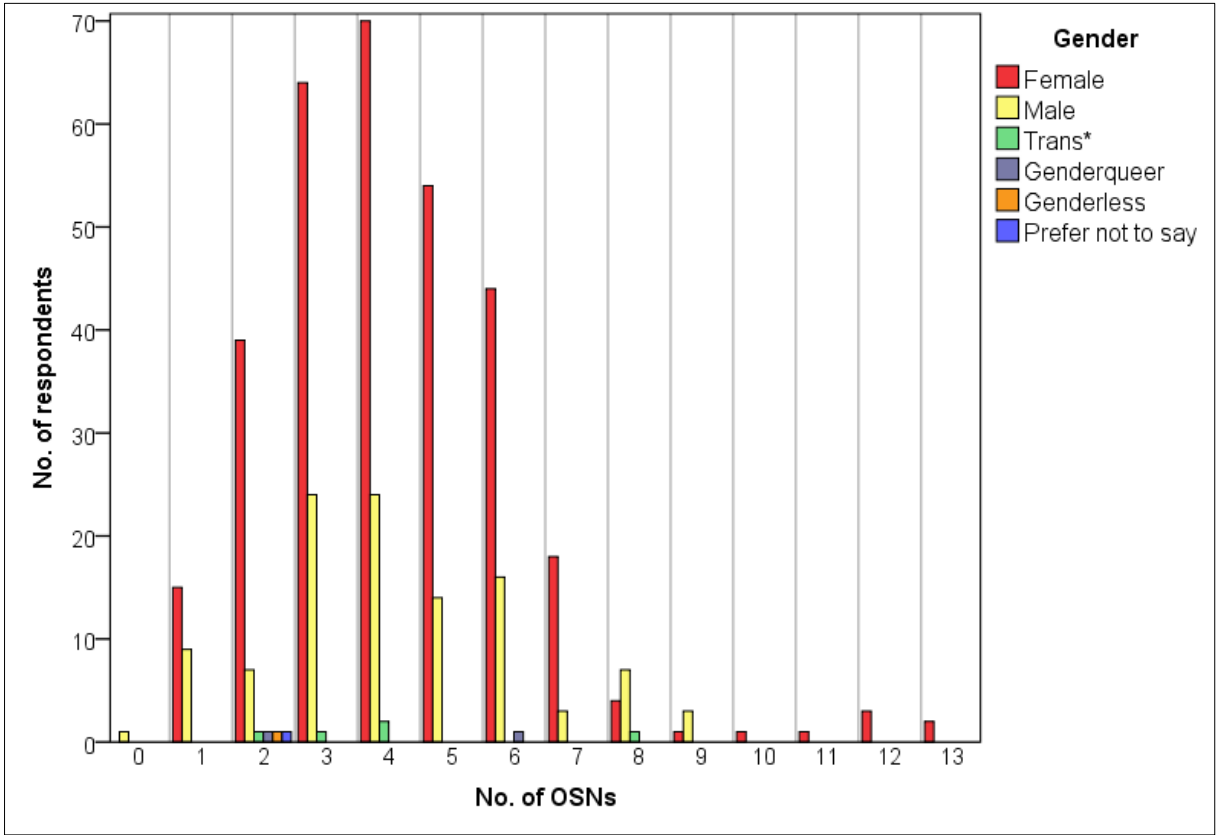


Figure 9 : Number of OSN memberships split by gender

Once again, age did not appear to influence the number of OSNs to which respondents belonged. Over 58% of respondents were members of between three and five OSNs. Eight of the nine respondents aged over 65 were members of five or fewer, and the remaining one listed nine.

The most OSNs listed by a respondent aged 18-24 was eight, and all of those listing 10 or more OSNs were aged between 25 and 54.

Although the most common overall number of OSNs given was four, this was the most frequent answer only for respondents aged 25-34 and 35-44. The most common answer for those aged 18-24 was five, and for the remaining age groups was three.

The majority of respondents were members of six or fewer OSNs and had been online since before 1995. There was no recognisable pattern with regard to the larger levels of OSN membership, though the six respondents who were members of 10 or more OSNs had all been online since 1997 or earlier.

The number of OSNs to which respondents belonged did not appear to have any significant relationship to the hours that they spent online in an average week. The only result that stood out was that of the 12 respondents who were members of 8 OSNs, 11 (91.7%) were online for more than 31 hours per week.

5.9 Membership of Discrete Online Social Networks

Question 8 asked respondents to list the online communities or social networks to which they belonged. A total of 163 discrete OSNs were listed by respondents, although only twelve were listed by 10 or more respondents. 113 were mentioned only once.

5.9.1 OSNs mentioned once

Some examples of the online social networks which were mentioned by only one respondent are listed, and briefly described, in Table 9 below.

Site name	Brief description
Brass Goggles	A blog (brassgoggles.co.uk/blog/) with attached forum based around steampunk ¹⁰ .
Emma's Diary	A website providing advice for expectant and new mothers, including members' forums (www.emmasdiary.co.uk/).
iVillage	An online information network for women, offering "interactive services, expert advice, information and a vital support network" (iVillage, 2013).
Plurk	Plurk (www.plurk.com/) is a micro-blogging and social networking site which originated in Canada but has now, due to its overwhelmingly Asian userbase, relocated to Taiwan (Russell, 2013).
Scene Nomad	A site for the LGBT community with the aim of enabling members to organise events where they can meet in person (www.scenenomad.com).
VZ Network	This German-based network is made up of several different social networking platforms: StudiVZ, SchülerVZ and MeinVZ. Similar to Facebook, StudiVZ (www.studivz.net/) is widely used in Germany, although its popularity has waned in the last few years.

Table 9 : Examples of OSNs named by a single respondent

5.9.2 Popular OSNs

Facebook was the most popular OSN, with 361 respondents as members. The top six websites were each named by more than 125 respondents and were, apart from Facebook: email lists, Twitter, LinkedIn, LiveJournal and Flickr.

¹⁰ Steampunk is a genre of fiction which is usually set in the 19th century and which features machinery, often steam-powered, which is ahead of its time, such as computers, rockets and robots. The term can also incorporate fashion, art and design.

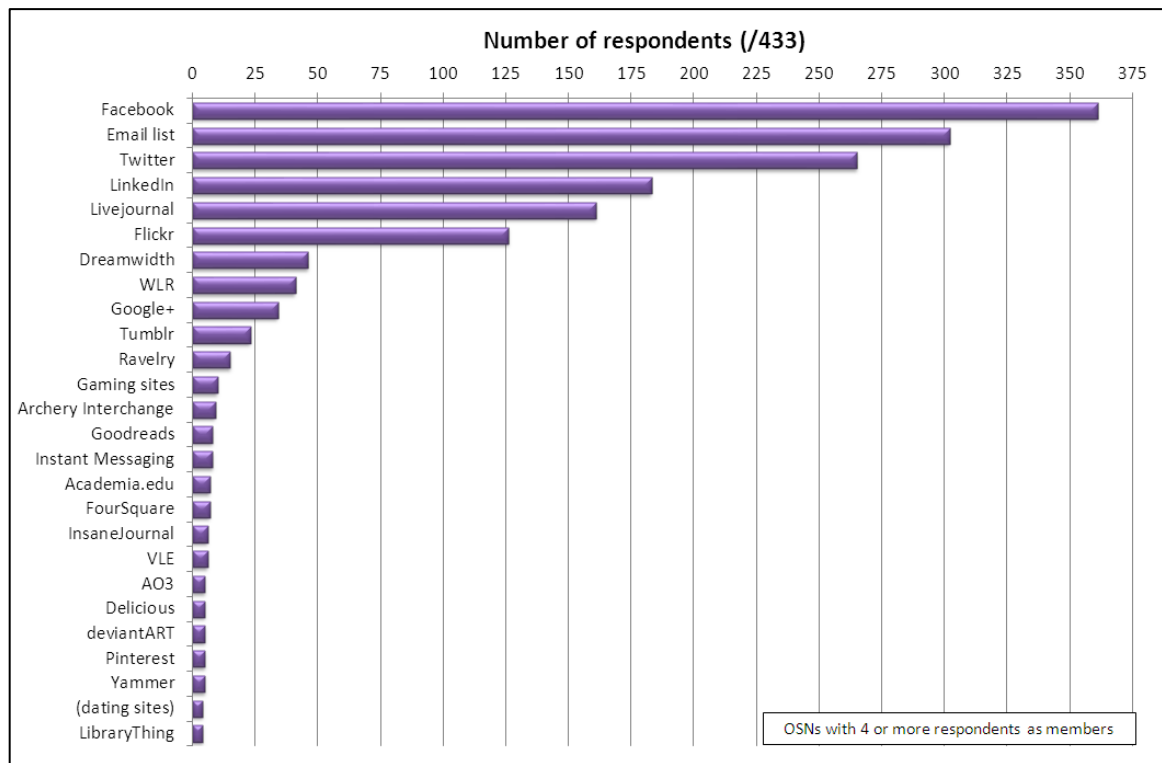


Figure 10 : Memberships of discrete OSNs

Of these six, two (Facebook and LiveJournal) are used almost exclusively for personal, social purposes. LinkedIn and email lists tend to be almost entirely professional, or at least significantly less social, used predominantly for information seeking and sharing. Twitter is more likely to be a mix between professional and social; the majority of people seem to bear in mind that, unless a Twitter account is restricted, it is public in a way that Facebook, for example, is not, and tailor their tweets accordingly. Flickr is a mix of practical use (i.e. the storage and sharing of photographs), professional and social.

The design of this question consisted of a list of popular networks, followed by a free text box in which respondents could add their own examples. As a result, a number of sites were named which are not widely known, and which were only mentioned by one respondent.

When conducting comparative analyses relating to the membership of individual online social networks, only the top 10 OSNs, those named by more than 20 respondents, have been examined. They are:

Facebook (361 respondents)
Email lists (302)
Twitter (265)
LinkedIn (183)
LiveJournal (161)
Flickr (126)
Dreamwidth (46)
Weight Loss Resources (41)
Google+ (34)
Tumblr (23).

A brief outline of these top 10 social networks follows.

5.9.2.1 Facebook

Facebook is a social networking site which was launched in 2004, initially for the exclusive use of students at Harvard University; in September 2006 it was made available to anyone over the age of 13. Users must register in order to be able to use the site: they may then create a profile, write updates, share photographs and connect to other users by adding them as Friends. Within Facebook, Friendship connections are reciprocal: once a user has accepted a Friend request from someone, they each have access to the other's profile and to any updates which are public or defined as Friends Only. Privacy settings can be altered to restrict who can see specific content. As well as posting personal updates and keeping up with Friends' activities, many users play games on Facebook, ranging from puzzle games, via Scrabble and poker, to more complex, and time-consuming, world-building games.

5.9.2.2 Email lists

Email lists, or electronic mailing lists, allow the distribution of emails to many recipients. They have been around for a long time; an early example of electronic mailing list software, LISTSERV, was created in 1984. There are two different types: announcement lists, which are similar to newsletters and may only allow a small number of people to send out or post messages; and discussion lists, which encourage two-way communication and contributions

from all members. Email lists tend to be based around a specific common interest, and many discourage too much ‘off-topic’ chat on the list.

5.9.2.3 Twitter

Twitter is a micro-blogging site, which restricts its users to 140 characters per message (or ‘tweet’) posted to the site. It was founded in 2006 and became very popular very quickly, with more than 500 million users registered in June 2012 (Lunden, 2012). It is primarily text-based, although photographs can be attached to tweets. On Twitter, users ‘follow’ other users, but there is no obligation to follow someone in return. Tweets can be replied to, marked as a ‘favourite’, and reposted from someone else’s timeline (list of tweets), as long as the original Twitter account is open. Protected, or private, Twitter accounts are invisible unless their owner has granted permission to follow; tweets from these accounts cannot be favourited or retweeted.

5.9.2.4 LinkedIn

LinkedIn describes itself as a professional network, with the aim of providing members with a useful set of contacts when they need a new job or business opportunity. In addition to enabling members to maintain a list of contacts and upload their CV, LinkedIn allows the creation of interest groups. There are currently more than a million groups, the majority of which are themed around specific industries or professions (LinkedIn, 2013).

5.9.2.5 LiveJournal

LiveJournal was established in 1999, and became increasingly popular; as at March 2013 it had almost 40 million accounts (LiveJournal, 2013). It began as a blogging platform, but in addition to personal blogs (or ‘journals’), it also allows the creation of communities; “journals with multiple members, all of whom have posting rights” (Merry & Simon, 2012, p. 243). The communities set it apart from other blogging sites. Individual LiveJournal members can engage with the site on different levels: by maintaining a personal journal; by participating in community journals; or by doing both.

5.9.2.6 Flickr

Flickr is a popular website used for the hosting of photographs and videos. Visitors to the site can view content without registering, but in order to upload content an account must be set up and a profile created. Flickr users can add other users as contacts, and categorise them as “friend”, “family” or both (Flickr, 2013), or can keep their profile hidden. In addition to the sharing of images and the creation of contacts, users can exchange comments on each other’s photos, and can take part in groups. Groups are either public or private: public groups are listed in various places on the site and can be either open to all or by invitation only; private groups are unlisted and are invitation-only.

5.9.2.7 Dreamwidth

Dreamwidth, as mentioned in Section 5.7 above, is based on LiveJournal’s open source codebase, and is structured in a similar way, with both individual and community journals. Two significant ways in which Dreamwidth differs from LiveJournal is the regular updates from the management team and the lack of third-party advertising, even on unpaid accounts. Since it is built on LiveJournal’s code, it shares many of the same functions, but is seen by many users as a more ‘friendly’ service, due to its open and sustainable philosophy (Dreamwidth, 2013).

5.9.2.8 Weight Loss Resources

Weightlossresources.co.uk (WLR) is a UK-based website for weight loss, incorporating a variety of tools including food and exercise diaries, food databases, active help teams, and member-only forums based around a variety of themes, including diet and exercise, other hobbies and interests, and general discussion topics. Only registered (paid) members can post on the forums and access other members’ profiles. WLR also enables members to Friend each other on a reciprocal basis, and it facilitates a “buddy system”, which enables members to find a partner to support them during their weight loss.

5.9.2.9 Google+

Google+ (or Google Plus) is a relatively new social networking service, launched in June 2011. It gained a high number of users very quickly; within

two months it had had 25 million unique visitors (Wasserman, 2011). Google+ offers a wide range of features, incorporating elements of other Google services such as Calendar and Search. Individuals can add other users to ‘Circles’, or groups: default Circles include Friends, Family and Acquaintances, and users can define other Circles of their choice. Google+ also facilitates video chats, instant messaging, and Communities, where users can create and join discussions on specific topics or common interests.

5.9.2.10 Tumblr

Tumblr was launched in 2007 and appears to be steadily increasing in popularity; as at January 2014 it was hosting 172 million blogs and 77 billion posts (Tumblr, 2014). It is, like Twitter, a microblogging platform, but unlike Twitter it does not restrict users to a specific length of post. If a user has not made their Tumblr private it can be viewed by non-members of the site, but in order to post content or make a comment on a post an individual must be a registered member. Social interaction is sometimes limited to users reposting content or clicking ‘Like’ on a post, since Tumblr blog designs do not include a commenting feature by default; it can therefore appear to be less social than other sites mentioned here.

5.9.3 OSNs and Gender

83% of respondents (361 of 433) were members of Facebook. Of these, 72% were female, and 26% male. These accounted for 82.5% of all female respondents and 86% of male respondents. Of the five respondents who identified as transgender, four were members of Facebook, as were all of the respondents identifying as genderqueer or genderless.

Of the 302 respondents who were members of email lists, 225 (74.5%) were female, and 72 (24%) male. The remaining five comprised four transgender and one genderqueer respondents.

The statistics for Twitter, as with Facebook and email lists, roughly reflect the overall gender split, with 72% of the respondents who were members being female, and 26%

male. 61% of all female respondents belonged to Twitter, and 64% of all male respondents.

However, LiveJournal members were overwhelmingly female, with 149 (92.5% of the total members) being women. Of the remaining LiveJournal members, eight were male, two transgender, one genderqueer and one was of unstated gender.

		Gender					Total
		Female	Male	Trans*	Genderqueer	Prefer not to say	
LiveJournal	Count	149	8	2	1	1	161
	% within LiveJournal	92.5%	5%	1.2%	0.6%	0.6%	100%
	% within Gender	47.1%	7.4%	40%	50%	100%	37.2%

Table 10 : LiveJournal membership split by gender

The bias towards female respondents was almost certainly due to the fact that several questionnaire invitations went out on LiveJournal pages belonging to people involved in (predominantly female-populated) fandom. Invitations were also sent out via Dreamwidth, which is a similar site to LiveJournal and has many members in common.

38% of all female respondents belonged to LinkedIn, and 57% of all male respondents. Traditionally, although it now provides themed discussion boards, LinkedIn has been less focused on social interaction, which may explain the lower percentage of female respondents who were members. Of the 183 respondents who belonged to LinkedIn, 120 (66%) were female and 62 (34%) were male.

Although Flickr is predominantly used by its non-professional members as a photo storage or sharing site, it also offers many themed groups and the ability to comment on and discuss photographs. 70.6% of respondents who were members of Flickr were female.

Dreamwidth members, as for LiveJournal, were mainly female (95%). Of the two non-female respondents who belonged to Dreamwidth, one was male and one did not specify a gender.

Weight Loss Resources members, as might be expected of a weight loss site, were 90% female. Four of the 41 respondents were male.

Google+ was the only OSN which was named by more male than female respondents; 19 of 34 (56%) were male, while 15 were female. According to an article on Forbes.com (Menzies, 2012, n.p.) 71% of Google+ members in mid-2012 were men.

Tumblr had a majority of female respondents as members. Of the 23 who named Tumblr, 17 (74%) were female, four (17%) were male and two were transgender.

5.9.4 OSNs and Age range

With such a high proportion of respondents belonging to Facebook, it is not surprising that a high percentage of respondents within each age group listed it in the questionnaire, with the exception of people aged 65 or older, where four of the nine respondents were members.

		Age						Total
		18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	
Facebook	Count	27	109	111	75	35	4	361
	% within Facebook	7.5%	30.2%	30.7%	20.8%	9.7%	1.1%	100%
	% within Age Group	90%	85.8%	87.4%	79.8%	76.08%	44.4%	83.4%

Table 11 : Facebook membership split by age range

Email lists were also popular, although more so with older respondents; only 50% of those aged between 18 and 24 were members. As a very long-standing example of online social networks, which have not changed significantly over the past 20 or more years, it is perhaps to be expected that the percentages of respondents in the higher age ranges who use email lists were significantly higher than those in the lowest age range.

		Age						Total
		18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	
Email lists	Count	15	87	85	67	39	9	302
	% within Email lists	5%	28.8%	28.1%	22.2%	12.9%	3.0%	100%
	% within Age Group	50%	68.5%	66.9%	71.2%	84.7%	100%	83.4%

Table 12 : Email list membership split by age range

On Twitter, the most represented age range was 35-44, with 34.7% of respondents in that group using Twitter. 73% of all 18-24 year-olds were members of Twitter, 50% of those in the 45-54 range, and 41% of those aged between 55 and 64. None of the respondents aged 65 or over belonged to Twitter.

All of the age groups were represented in LiveJournal membership, ranging from 22% of those over 65 to 43% of 18-24 year olds.

LinkedIn was most popular with respondents aged between 25 and 54, which may reflect its focus on professional networking and its use as a tool for people who are seeking new employment or work-related opportunities.

		Age						Total
		18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	
LinkedIn	Count	5	57	63	43	14	1	183
	% within LinkedIn	2.7%	31.1%	34.4%	23.5%	7.7%	0.5%	100%
	% within Age Group	16.6%	44.8%	49.6%	45.7%	30.4%	11.1%	42.3%

Table 13 : LinkedIn membership split by age range

Although Google+ had relatively few members among the questionnaire respondents, there were respondents from each age group with the exception of those aged 65 or over. This could be because they are a naturally more cautious group and less likely to join what is a relatively new service.

Tumblr, which was launched in 2007, is sometimes considered to be an OSN which is more popular with younger users, though it received more recognition, particularly in the United States, when it was used as part of President Obama's re-election campaign in 2012 (Bilton, 2011). Nine respondents aged between 18 and 24 (30% of total respondents in that age group) belonged to Tumblr, 6% of those aged 25-34, and 4% of those aged 35-44.

5.9.5 OSNs and Countries of residence

As noted above, there is a significant gap between the two most frequently stated countries of residence (UK and USA) and the rest, and therefore this section will focus particularly on these two locations.

Facebook membership was high, with 84% of all UK respondents and 82.5% of US respondents as members. Respondents from only three countries (out of 25) did not list Facebook on their questionnaire, but each of these respondents belonged to at least two other OSNs.

Email lists were slightly less popular, with 66.3% of UK respondents and 74.2% of US respondents as members. Of the seven countries which were named by four or more respondents, the percentages of respondents belonging to email lists were generally high.

		Location						
		UK	USA	Canada	Ireland	Germany	Australia	Israel
Email lists	Count	171	89	8	7	5	2	3
	% within Email lists	56.6%	29.5%	2.6%	2.3%	1.7%	0.7%	1%
	% within Country	66.3%	74.2%	80%	87.5%	83.3%	50%	75%

Table 14 : Email list membership split by country of residence

Respondents from five countries (out of 25) did not include email lists on their questionnaires.

Twitter membership was slightly lower, and was less popular with UK respondents than with those from the USA, with 58.5% and 68.3% of respondents respectively.

LiveJournal membership was more prevalent in respondents based in the USA, who accounted for almost 53% of the total LiveJournal members. 70.8% of US-based respondents to the questionnaire belonged to LiveJournal, compared to 19.7% of UK-based respondents.

LinkedIn was slightly more popular with respondents from the UK than those from the USA. 113 UK respondents (43.8%) listed LinkedIn as one of their OSNs; these

constituted 61.7% of the total LinkedIn members. 38.3% of all US respondents were LinkedIn members.

The percentage of UK and US respondents using Flickr were roughly equal, with 28.7% of those from the UK and 29.2% of those from the USA using the site.

Dreamwidth, as with LiveJournal, was more popular with US respondents than those from the UK, although those two groups accounted for more than 82% of the total members. 22.5% of US respondents, and 4.3% of UK respondents, belonged to Dreamwidth.

Google+ was slightly more popular in the USA than the UK, with 9.2% and 6.2% respectively of total respondents as members. Tumblr was also more popular in the USA, with 10 of 120 respondents (8.3%) as members, against only 3% of UK respondents.

5.9.6 OSNs and Number of OSN memberships

Generally speaking, there were no significant results found by cross-tabulating the specific OSNs to which respondents belonged and the number of their OSN memberships, with the exception of those respondents who only named one OSN. 24 respondents stated that they belonged to only one online social network; five OSNs were listed, as shown in Table 15 below:

OSN	No. of respondents	% within discrete OSN	% within No. of OSNs
Facebook	11	3%	45.8%
Email lists	8	2.6%	33.3%
LiveJournal	2	1.2%	8.3%
Archery Interchange	2	22.2%	8.3%
Weight Loss Resources	1	2.4%	4.2%

Table 15 : OSNs named by respondents who only belonged to one OSN

The most common answer for respondents who belonged to only one OSN was Facebook, with 11 of 24 respondents: this amounted to 3% of the total respondents who belonged to Facebook. The popularity, or ubiquity, of Facebook means that it is not surprising that for some people it is the only online social network they need; it provides entertainment and social interaction to a high degree. Of the 11 respondents

who stated that they only belonged to Facebook, six were female and five were male. They were spread across all age groups, though the majority were aged between 25 and 44.

Eight respondents stated that the only OSNs that they belonged to were email lists. As noted above, email lists are a long-standing type of online network, and are often used for the sharing and exchange of information on a specific topic. The users who were contacted via the Freecycle social email group (sample group code *ww1*) had been sorted into this category. Of the eight, six were female and two were male; the age ranges of the respondents were evenly split between those in the 25-34 age group and those aged 45 and over.

The two respondents who only listed LiveJournal were both female, and were in the 45-54 and 55-64 age groups.

Archery Interchange was not in the top 10 most popular OSNs. Nine respondents stated that they belonged to this site, which provides a forum for those interested in archery to share information and advice. The research invitation was posted on that forum asking particularly for men to take part, and as a result eight of the nine respondents who were members were male. Both of the respondents who said that Archery Interchange is their only online social network were male, and both gave their age as between 45 and 54.

The respondent whose only listed OSN was Weight Loss Resources was female, and aged between 45 and 54.

5.10 Making Friends Online

Of the 433 respondents to the questionnaire, 351 (81%) answered 'Yes' to Question 8, which asked whether they had ever made friends with someone whom they had originally met online.

This response rate was echoed within the discrete gender categories, with 85% of women answering 'Yes', and 70% of men. The high proportion of women who answered 'Yes'

reflects the accepted view that women are more likely to use online environments to make connections and seek out friendship rather than for seeking information (Kennedy, Wellman & Klement, 2003; Hampton, Goulet et al., 2011).

100% of respondents who identified as genderqueer, genderless or who did not specify a gender answered 'Yes' to this question, though the numbers are far too small to make any generalisations from these results.

Gender * Made friends online Crosstabulation					
			Made friends online		Total
			No	Yes	
Gender	Female	Count	48	268	316
		% within Gender	15.2%	84.8%	100.0%
		% within Made friends online	58.5%	76.4%	73.0%
	Male	Count	32	76	108
		% within Gender	29.6%	70.4%	100.0%
		% within Made friends online	39.0%	21.7%	24.9%
	Trans*	Count	2	3	5
		% within Gender	40.0%	60.0%	100.0%
		% within Made friends online	2.4%	0.9%	1.2%
	Genderqueer	Count	0	2	2
		% within Gender	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% within Made friends online	0.0%	0.6%	0.5%
	Genderless	Count	0	1	1
		% within Gender	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% within Made friends online	0.0%	0.3%	0.2%
	Prefer not to say	Count	0	1	1
		% within Gender	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% within Made friends online	0.0%	0.3%	0.2%
Total		Count	82	351	433
		% within Gender	18.9%	81.1%	100.0%
		% within Made friends online	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 16 : Respondents who had made friends online, split by gender

Prior to beginning the data collection for this research, an assumption could have been made that younger people were more likely to make friends online. Although some respondents stated that they had not made friends online (82 – 18.9% of the total), the vast majority had done so.

This high response rate was probably due to the wording of the invitations to participate; the fact that it was about the experience of making friends online would certainly have enticed

people to participate if they had positive experiences to relate. Friendship is a subject which is, by definition, dear to everyone's heart, but it is often quite rare for individuals to have the opportunity to evaluate or to talk about their friendships and why they are important to them.

In total, 83% of the respondents aged between 18 and 64, and 56% of those aged 65 or over, said that they had made friends online.

Seven countries were named by four or more respondents as their place of residence, and a high percentage of respondents from each of these countries stated that they had made friends online. The percentage of affirmative answers from UK residents was slightly lower than the others, at 73.6%.

The remaining figures were too small to enable conclusions to be drawn.

	Yes	No	totals
UK	190	68	258
% by country	73.6%	26.4%	100.0%
% by made friends online	54.1%	82.9%	59.6%
USA	110	10	120
% by country	91.7%	8.3%	100.0%
% by made friends online	31.3%	12.2%	27.7%
Canada	10	0	10
% by country	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
% by made friends online	2.8%	0.0%	2.3%
Ireland	7	1	8
% by country	87.5%	12.5%	100.0%
% by made friends online	2.0%	1.2%	1.8%
Germany	6	0	6
% by country	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
% by made friends online	1.7%	0.0%	1.4%
Australia	4	0	4
% by country	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
% by made friends online	1.1%	0.0%	0.9%
Israel	4	0	4
% by country	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
% by made friends online	1.1%	0.0%	0.9%

Table 17 : Respondents who had made friends online, split by location

84% of those who had been online since before 2000, and 56% of those who had had access since 2000, stated that they had made friends online. Both of the respondents who had been online for less than five years answered 'No' to this question.

The percentage of people who had made friends online increased as the hours spent online increased, with the exception of those who spent five or fewer hours online. Of the nine people who were online for five hours or fewer, only three (33%) had made a friend online; for the other categories the percentages were from 72% to 88%.

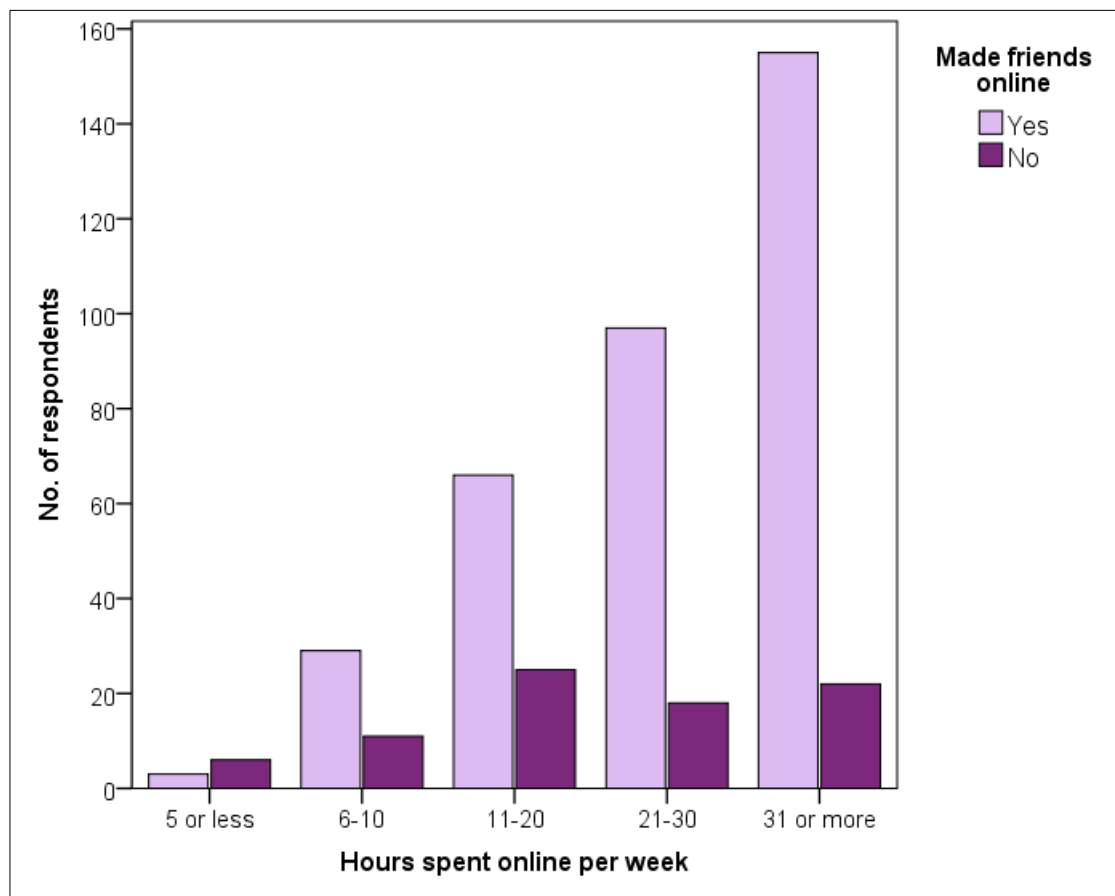


Figure 11 : Made friends online, split by hours spent online per week

It appears from the cross-tabulation shown in Table 18 below that there is a relationship – though not a statistically significant one – between the number of OSNs which an individual belongs to and their likelihood of making a friend online. Over 93% of the respondents who belong to seven or more OSNs stated that they had made a friend online.

No.OSNs * Made friends online Crosstabulation					
			Made friends online		Total
			Yes	No	
No.OSNs 0	Count		1	0	1
	% within No.OSNs		100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
1	Count		13	11	24
	% within No.OSNs		54.2%	45.8%	100.0%
2	Count		39	11	50
	% within No.OSNs		78.0%	22.0%	100.0%
3	Count		64	25	89
	% within No.OSNs		71.9%	28.1%	100.0%
4	Count		75	21	96
	% within No.OSNs		78.1%	21.9%	100.0%
5	Count		61	7	68
	% within No.OSNs		89.7%	10.3%	100.0%
6	Count		57	4	61
	% within No.OSNs		93.4%	6.6%	100.0%
7	Count		19	2	21
	% within No.OSNs		90.5%	9.5%	100.0%
8	Count		11	1	12
	% within No.OSNs		91.7%	8.3%	100.0%
9	Count		4	0	4
	% within No.OSNs		100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
10	Count		1	0	1
	% within No.OSNs		100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
11	Count		1	0	1
	% within No.OSNs		100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
12	Count		3	0	3
	% within No.OSNs		100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
13	Count		2	0	2
	% within No.OSNs		100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Total	Count		351	82	433
	% within No.OSNs		81.1%	18.9%	100.0%

Table 18 : Made friends online, split by number of OSN memberships

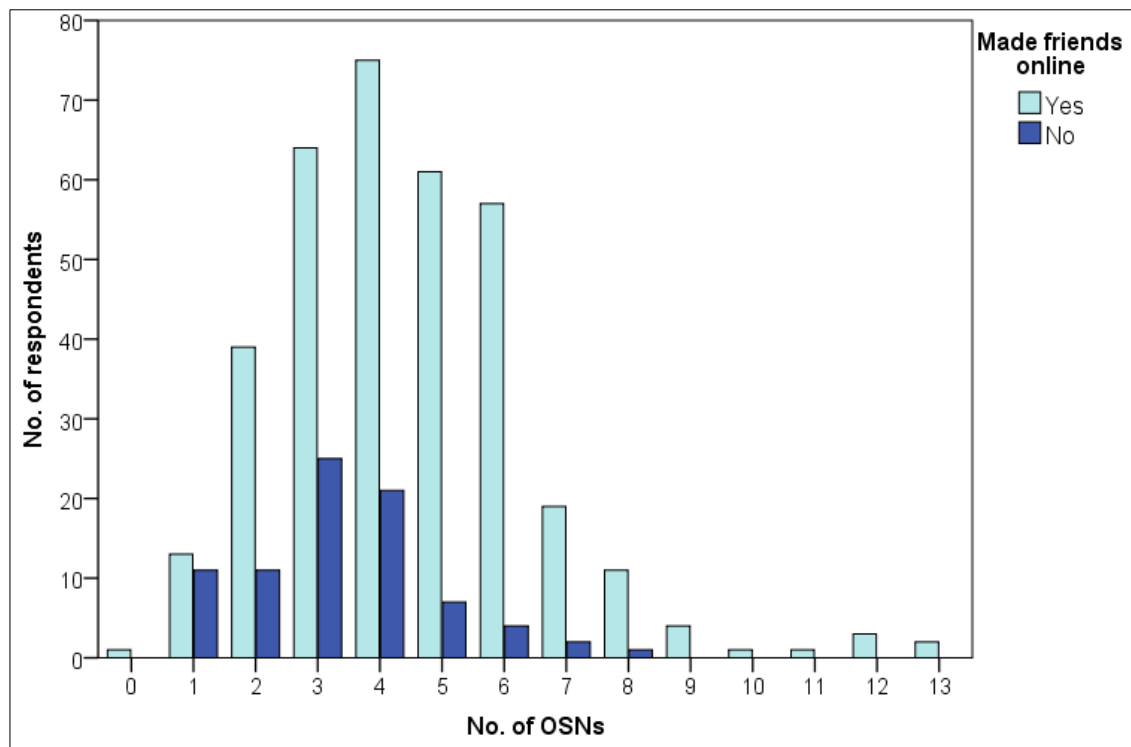


Figure 12 : Made friends online, split by number of OSN memberships

Of the 24 respondents who had only listed one OSN on the questionnaire, 13 had made a friend online, of whom nine were female. They were from every age group, though the majority (seven respondents) were aged between 35 and 54.

5.11 Meeting an Online Friend Face-to-face

Question 9 asked respondents whether they had ever met an online friend in person. The number of people who answered 'Yes' was only marginally smaller than the number who had made a friend online. 351 respondents said they had made an online friend, and 340 (78.5% of the total) said that they had had a face-to-face meeting with someone originally met online.

Cross-tabulating these answers by gender gives results which almost exactly mirror those of Question 8. 81.6% of female respondents said that they had met an online friend face-to-face, as did 69.4% of men.

There are two figures in the comparison of respondents who had met their online friends in person and respondents' age groups which do not match up to the previous one: in the age

ranges 55-64 and 65 and over the number of respondents who stated that they had met an online friend in person was one higher than in the answers to whether they had made a friend online. This may have been due to mis-clicks, or to the fact that this second question led to a more careful consideration of their experiences.

Comparing this question to the locations of respondents shows an overwhelmingly positive response. However, UK respondents seemed to be slightly more reticent than their US counterparts, with 71.3% answering 'Yes' to this question, compared with 90% of Americans.

Of the respondents who resided in the next five most commonly-represented countries, all but one (from Germany) answered 'Yes' to this question. As noted before, it could be the case that the topic of the research encouraged people with particularly positive experiences to respond to the questionnaire, thus providing a high level of affirmative answers.

Generally, the high percentage of respondents who had had a face-to-face meeting with an online friend was consistent no matter how long they had had access to the Internet. The four most recently-online respondents, who had had access to the Internet since 2006, answered 'No' to this question, although one of them had made a friend online.

Again, with the exception of those who spent five or fewer hours online per week, the percentage of respondents who had had a face-to-face meeting with an online friend increased as the time spent online increased.

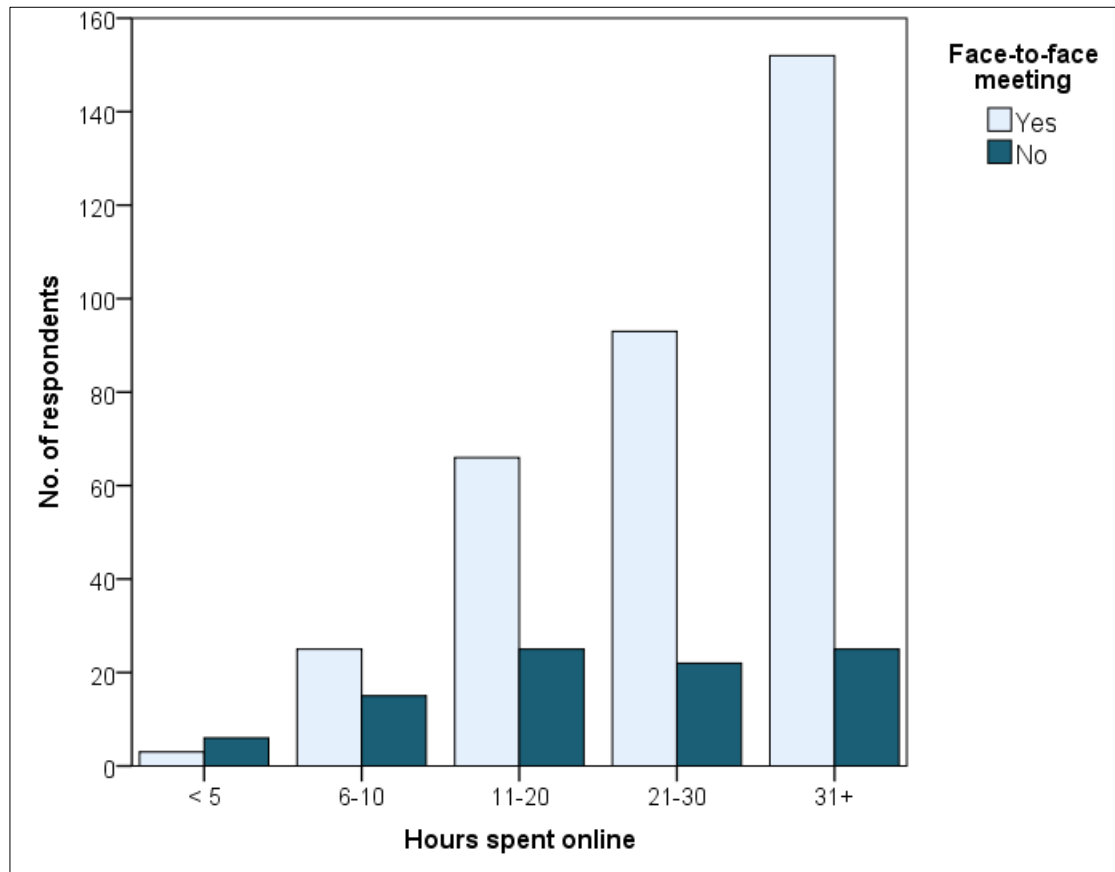


Figure 13 : Face-to-face meeting, split by hours spent online

Comparing the answers to Questions 8 and 9 of the questionnaire shows some disparity, which is illustrated in the graph below. In total, 351 respondents said that they had made a friend online, and 340 said that they had met an online friend in person. However, these two results do not slot neatly together: of the 82 people who stated that they had not made an online friend, 12 answered ‘Yes’ to the question, “Have you ever had a ‘real life’ meeting with an online friend (someone whom you originally met online)?”.

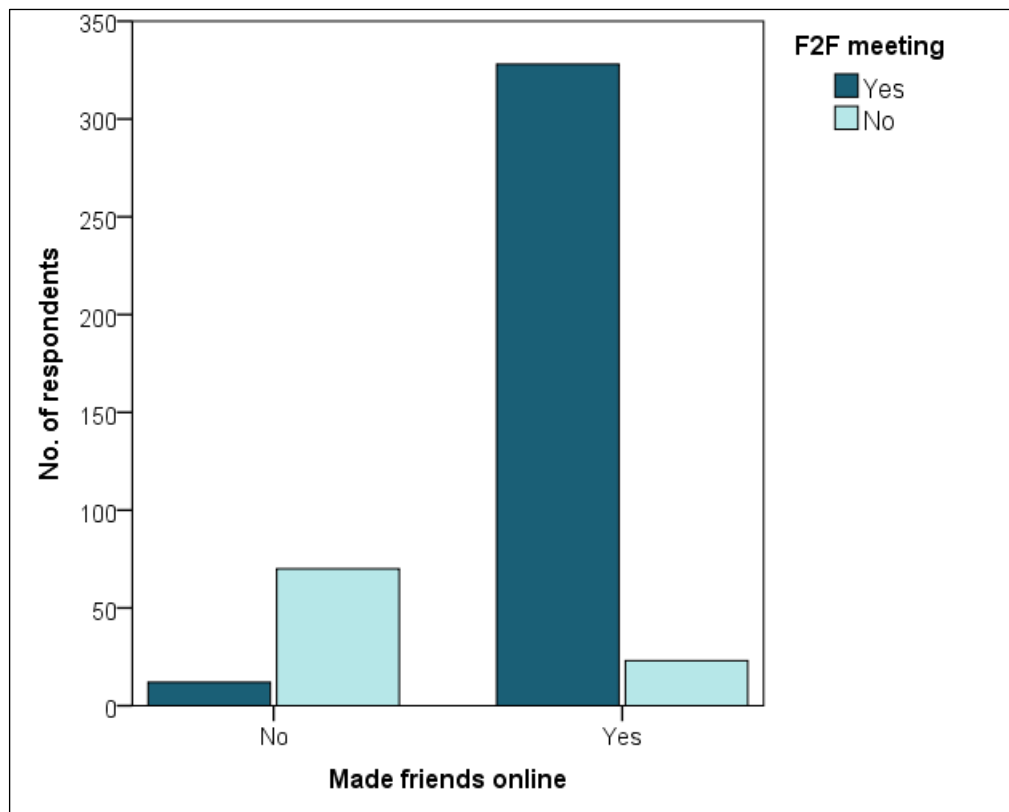


Figure 14 : Made friends online, split by face-to-face meeting

There may be several reasons for this: a respondent could have clicked ‘No’ in answer to Question 8 but not noticed that they had done so; they could have considered their idea of an online friend more carefully on reading Question 9 or one of the later questions on the webpage, but not changed their answer to Question 8; or, as is always a risk in online surveys, they could have clicked through the questions very quickly, answering in a completely random way. Without contacting those 12 people, it is impossible to know.

5.12 The Number of Online Friends Met

Question 10 (“How many online friends have you met in person?”) led directly on from Question 9 (“Have you ever had a ‘real life’ meeting with an online friend?”) and was predominantly intended to make respondents think more carefully about their online friendships. 338 of the respondents had met at least one online friend in person.

The difficulty with these two questions is that, for example, members of an interest-based community might meet up at a show or a convention and respondents could have used such a gathering as their answer, counting a group of perhaps dozens as “online friends met in

person”. Short of giving very detailed guidance for these questions it was not possible to prevent such a thing happening, although the later, free text, Question 12 provided further detail on many of these answers.

Two respondents answered ‘Yes’ to Question 9 but did not provide an answer to this question. This could be due to a mis-click in Question 9, or because this question required a little more thought and therefore the answers are more accurate.

Number of online friends met					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	38	8.8	11.2	11.2
	2	31	7.1	9.2	20.4
	3 or more	269	62.0	79.6	100.0
	Total	338	77.9	100.0	

Table 19 : Number of online friends met in person

Almost 80% of those who had met an online friend in person had met three or more people; this may be due to meetings of groups based around common interests, or it could be that, following one successful meeting, people are more willing to meet in person.

Over 79% of both male and female respondents stated that they had met three or more friends in person. The remainder were split fairly evenly between one and two online friends met, with 11.2% and 9.2% respectively.

As mentioned above, two respondents (one male, one female) did not answer this question, despite stating that they had met an online friend in person.

338 people answered this question: the percentages for each age group giving the highest answer were broadly similar, with only respondents of 65 and over falling below 74%.

With the exception of the “5 hours or fewer” category, the counts for the number of online friends met by respondents rose as the hours spent online increased. The majority of respondents in each category had met three or more friends, ranging from 68% of those spending 6-10 hours online to 83% of those spending more than 31 hours online.

HoursOnline * OnlineFriendsMet Crosstabulation						
			OnlineFriendsMet			Total
			1	2	3 or more	
HoursOnline	< 5	Count	0	2	1	3
		% within HoursOnline	0.0%	66.7%	33.3%	100.0%
		% within OnlineFriendsMet	0.0%	6.5%	0.4%	0.9%
	6-10	Count	7	1	17	25
		% within HoursOnline	28.0%	4.0%	68.0%	100.0%
		% within OnlineFriendsMet	18.4%	3.2%	6.3%	7.4%
	11-20	Count	7	6	51	64
		% within HoursOnline	10.9%	9.4%	79.7%	100.0%
		% within OnlineFriendsMet	18.4%	19.4%	19.0%	19.0%
	21-30	Count	10	10	73	93
		% within HoursOnline	10.8%	10.8%	78.5%	100.0%
		% within OnlineFriendsMet	26.3%	32.3%	27.2%	27.6%
	31+	Count	14	12	126	152
		% within HoursOnline	9.2%	7.9%	82.9%	100.0%
		% within OnlineFriendsMet	36.8%	38.7%	47.0%	45.1%
	Total	Count	38	31	268	337
		% within HoursOnline	11.3%	9.2%	79.5%	100.0%
		% within OnlineFriendsMet	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 20 : Number of online friends met, split by hours spent online

The discrepancy mentioned in Section 5.11 above is repeated in the answers to Question 10 – “If you answered ‘Yes’ to question 9: how many online friends have you met in person?”. Ten respondents (of the 12 mentioned above), despite answering ‘No’ to the question of whether they had made a friend online, gave an answer to this question. One respondent had met one online friend in person, three had met two online friends, and six answered that they had met three or more.

5.13 From online to offline

Question 11 asked whether any online friends had become a part of the respondent’s everyday, ‘real’ life. 235 respondents said that they had, and 230 gave further information in answer to Question 12, which was an open question (discussed in Section 5.15 below).

This was a particularly important question, as it directly relates to the central research question; it was also used as an interview identifier.

As can be seen from the graph below, cross-tabulating the answers to this question by gender gives results which do not reflect the overall gender split. Of the 101 men who answered this question, only 41 (40.6%) stated that an online friend had become part of their everyday life, as opposed to 61% of women (188 of 308). Of the four transgender respondents who answered the question, two answered ‘Yes’ and two answered ‘No’; the remaining four respondents all answered ‘Yes’.

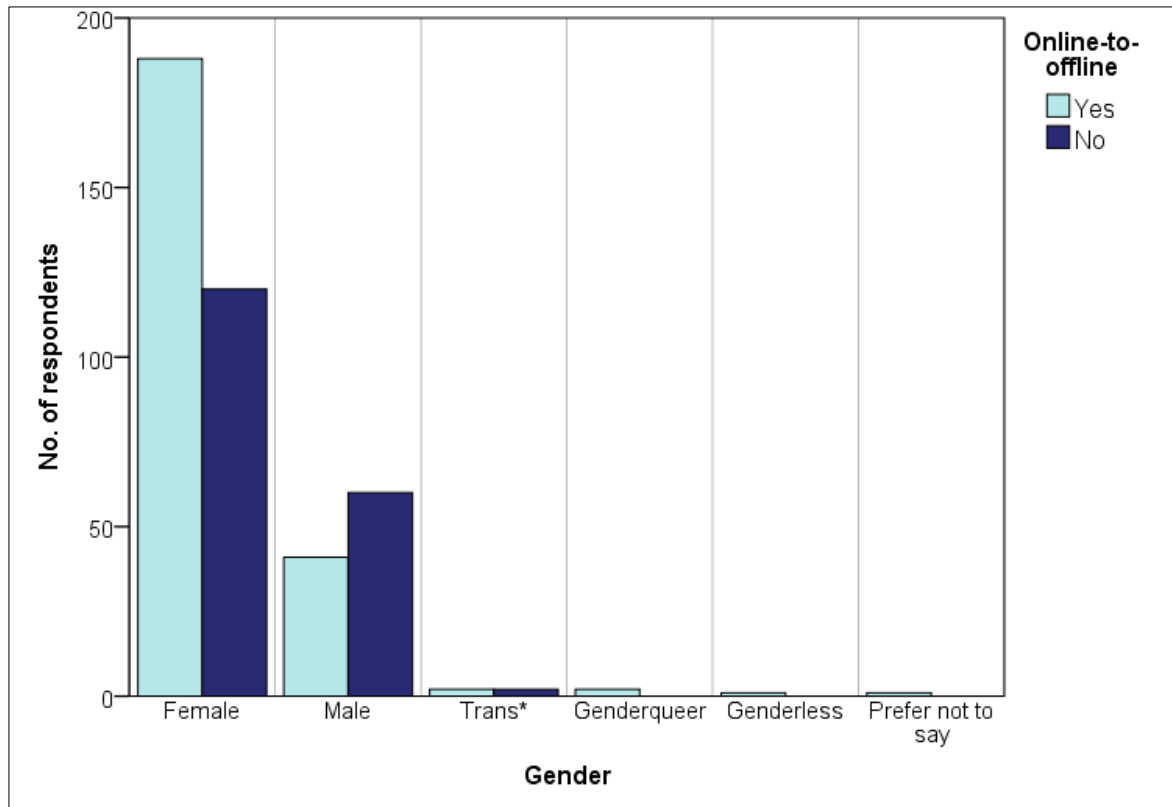


Figure 15 : Friends moved from online to offline, split by gender

Again, this may reflect the general assumption within the literature that men are less likely to make strong, true friendships online, or it may be due to the societal expectations that men are more self-sufficient and less likely to self-disclose online, which is an important building-block of friendship (see Sections 2.7.2 and 6.6.2).

Interestingly, with the exception of the youngest age group, where 55% of respondents stated that an online friend had become a regular part of their everyday life, the percentage of respondents who answered ‘Yes’ to this question increased as the ages rose, ranging from 54% of 25-34 year olds to 66% of those who were 65 or older.

Age * Online friendship moved offline? Crosstabulation					
			Online friendship moved offline?		Total
			No	Yes	
Age	18-24	Count	13	16	29
		% within Age	44.8%	55.2%	100.0%
	25-34	Count	57	66	123
		% within Age	46.3%	53.7%	100.0%
	35-44	Count	53	67	120
		% within Age	44.2%	55.8%	100.0%
	45-54	Count	38	53	91
		% within Age	41.8%	58.2%	100.0%
	55-64	Count	18	27	45
		% within Age	40.0%	60.0%	100.0%
	65+	Count	3	6	9
		% within Age	33.3%	66.7%	100.0%
	Total	Count	182	235	417
		% within Age	43.6%	56.4%	100.0%

Table 21 : Friends moved from online to offline, split by age group

This could be as a result of an increase in confidence as people age, or to do with a correspondingly increasing length of time on online communities.

Again, respondents from the seven most common countries of residence overwhelmingly reported the expansion of their online friendships into their offline lives. For respondents from the UK, however, the split between ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ answers was minimal – 50.4% (124 of 246) answered ‘Yes’, compared to 68.1% of American respondents.

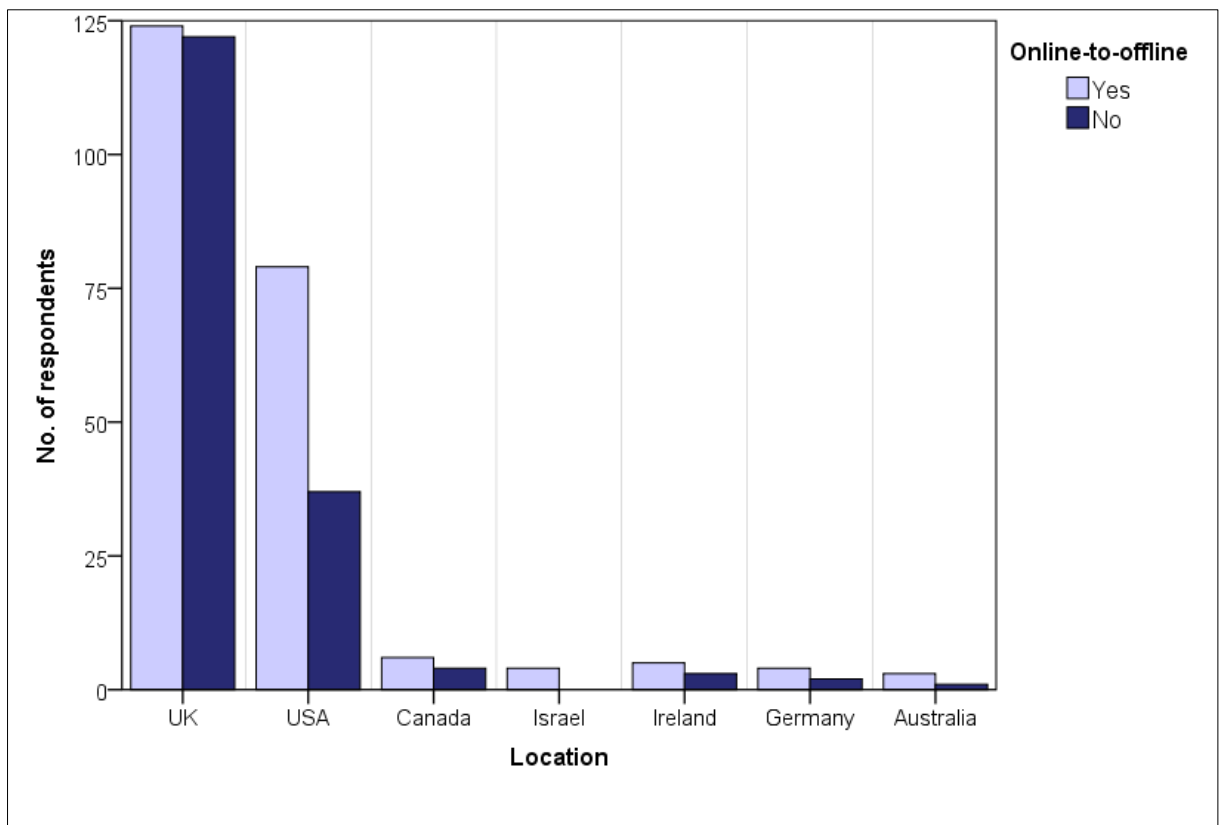


Figure 16 : Friends moved from online to offline, split by location

Of the 334 respondents who stated that they had had access to the Internet since 1999 or earlier, over 60% indicated that an online friend had become part of their everyday, offline life. Of the remaining 63 respondents, just under 40% felt that an online friend had become part of their offline social network.

Considering the discrepancy in the total number of respondents within these two categories, it is difficult to draw solid conclusions, but it would appear from these results that longer experience of social interaction online is more likely to encourage the introduction of an online friend to, and into, offline social circles, whether of friends or family. The more experience of online socialising an individual has, the more likely they are to participate in mutual self-disclosure and other trust-building activities which facilitate deeper levels of friendship.

Although the majority of people who answered Question 11 felt that they had incorporated an online friend into their offline lives, there was no steady rise in positive answers as time online increased. Once again, most of the respondents who spent five or fewer hours online per week did not report moving an online friendship into their offline social circles. The largest percentage of affirmative responses came from people who spent between 21 and 30 hours online, with 63% moving an online friendship offline.

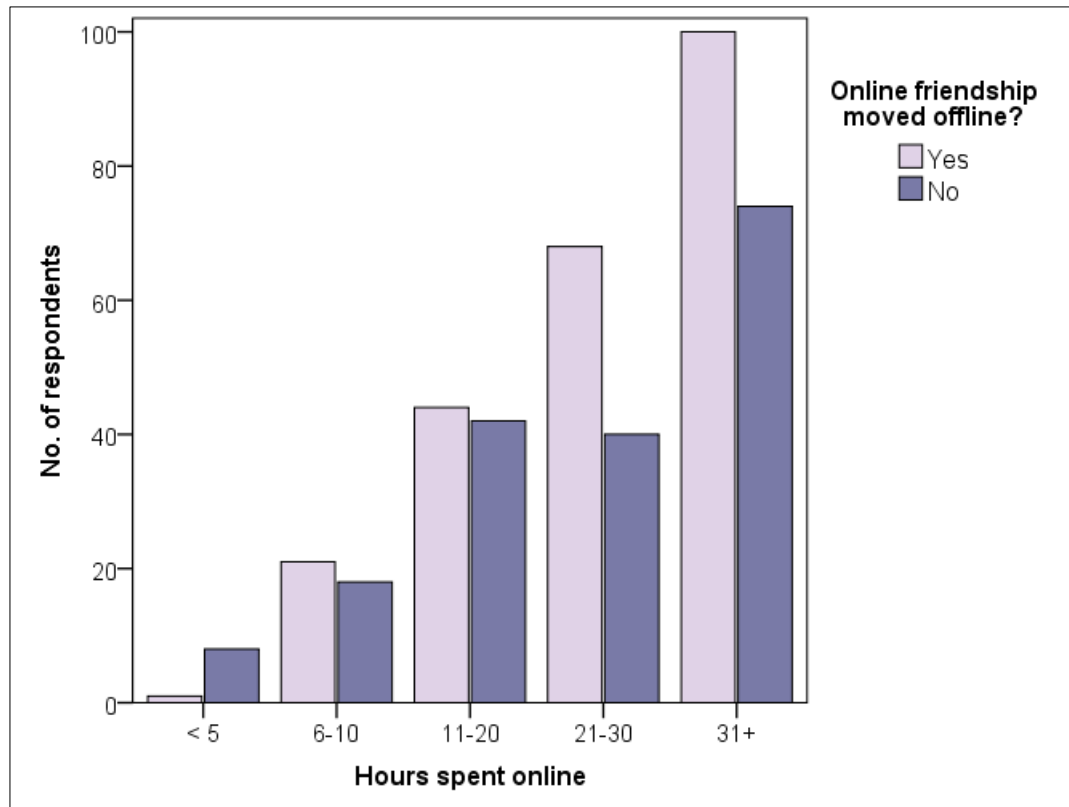


Figure 17 : Friends moved from online to offline, split by hours spent online

There was no significant relationship between the number of OSNs to which respondents belonged and the likelihood of transferring an online friendship offline.

Although the majority of respondents had answered that an online friendship had become part of their everyday life, perhaps meeting their family or other friends, it was not an overwhelming majority (56%).

The following graph (Figure 18) illustrates a cross-tabulation between the answers to Question 8 (whether the respondent had made friends with someone originally met online) and Question 11, and it relates strongly to the central research question: to what extent does regular online interaction affect participants' offline, everyday social networks? A note following Question 11 suggested that examples of involving an online friend in one's offline, everyday life could include meeting family or having regular visits.

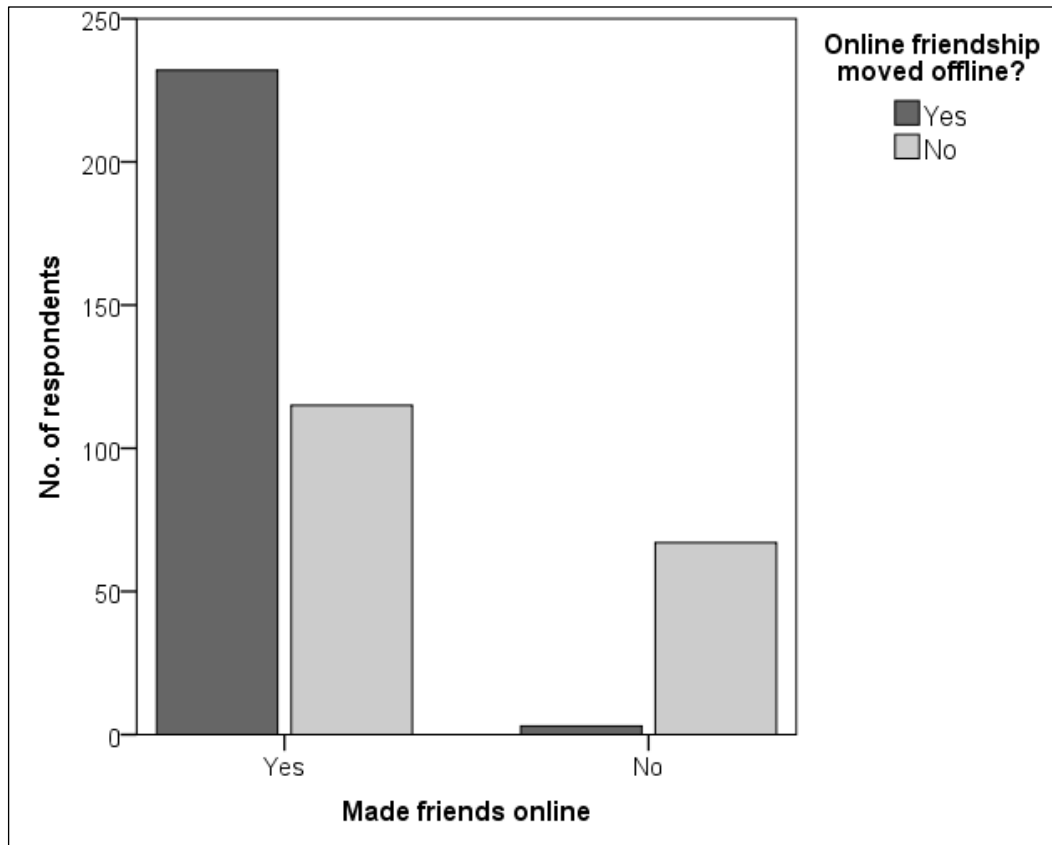


Figure 18 : Made friends online, split by friends moved from online to offline

Of the 82 respondents who stated that they had not made friends online, three stated that an online friend had become a regular part of their offline life. All three answered the free text question asking for further details: one was exclusively focused on online dating and romantic relationships; one wrote of “renewing old acquaintances” (R211), which presumably means that he was using the Internet to contact people he had known before; and the third gave examples of people he had interacted with online but who had turned out to be people he had already known in person.

Of the 340 respondents who had met an online friend in person, 68.5% (233) said that they had integrated an online friend into their everyday, offline life.

Two respondents said that online friends had become part of their everyday life, having stated that they had not met an online friend in person; these were two of the respondents mentioned above.

72.9% of female respondents who had met an online friend face-to-face had moved at least one of their friendships offline, compared to 52% of men.

59.3% of respondents aged 18-24 who had met an online friend in person had extended an online friendship into their offline life; this was a lower percentage than the other age groups, which ranged from 67.3% of 25-34 year olds to 83.3% of those aged 65 or older.

The majority of respondents who had met online friends stated that they had met three or more friends face-to-face. There does not seem to be a direct relationship between the number of online friends met and the tendency to move an online friendship offline.

Number of online friends met * Online friendship moved offline? Crosstabulation					
			Online friendship moved offline?		Total
			No	Yes	
Number of online friends met	1	Count	20	18	38
		% within Number of online friends met	52.6%	47.4%	100.0%
		% within Online friendship moved offline?	19.0%	7.7%	11.2%
	2	Count	22	9	31
		% within Number of online friends met	71.0%	29.0%	100.0%
		% within Online friendship moved offline?	21.0%	3.9%	9.2%
	3 or more	Count	63	206	269
		% within Number of online friends met	23.4%	76.6%	100.0%
		% within Online friendship moved offline?	60.0%	88.4%	79.6%
Total	Count	105	233	338	
	% within Number of online friends met	31.1%	68.9%	100.0%	
	% within Online friendship moved offline?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Table 22 : Number of online friends met, split by online to offline

47.4% of respondents who had met up with one online friend had moved an online friendship offline, into their everyday life. This percentage dropped to 29% for those who had met two online friends, and rose again to 76.6% of those who had met three or more friends in person.

These results could reflect the two ends of the friendship-making spectrum: individuals who make few friends online, but put significant effort into maintaining and transforming those friendships, and those who make many friends online and meet them in greater numbers, perhaps in a more casual way, and who may only include a small percentage of those in their offline lives.

5.14 Potential Interviewees

270 respondents said that they were willing to be interviewed. Of these, 155 were in the UK.

5.15 Online Friends as Part of Offline Life

Question 11 asked, “Have any of your online friends become a regular part of your ‘real life’ (met your family, regular visits, etc)?”. As discussed in Section 5.13 above, 235 respondents answered ‘Yes’ to this question. 230 respondents answered Question 12, which said, “If you answered ‘Yes’ to question 11, please provide more information (as much as you are comfortable with).”. Of the 230, seven were respondents who had replied ‘No’ to Question 11 but nonetheless answered Question 12. Twelve people who had answered ‘Yes’ to Question 11 did not supply further information in Question 12.

The answers to this question relate directly to the central research question: “To what extent does regular online interaction affect participants’ offline, everyday social networks?”. They are also associated with the research aims which were identified, particularly with regard to the value placed on online friendships and how commonly they are integrated into participants’ offline, everyday lives.

The examples given in Question 11 of online friends meeting respondents’ families or making regular visits were added after the questionnaire was piloted, to provide guidance to

respondents. It was perhaps to be expected, then, that the three most common themes within the answers to Question 12 were visiting or staying in each other's homes, meeting family members or other friends, and having regular face-to-face meetings.

Of the 230 answers to Question 12, 36 were excluded from the analysis. 25 of these were focused exclusively on romantic relationships, mentioning experiences of meeting potential or eventual partners online. Eight answers were classified as 'not relevant' due to mentioning someone else's relationship or friendship ("My sister met her husband online" (R323)) or the online renewal of pre-existing offline friendships. The remaining three respondents used the space to state that they would not answer the question. This left 194 answers, which were coded into themes and sub-themes using NVivo qualitative analysis software.

5.15.1 Visiting each other's homes

The most common theme identified within the free-text answers was that of respondents visiting a friend they had made online, or vice versa; this was mentioned by 88 respondents (45% of the total relevant answers).

Some respondents mentioned visits but did not provide any details of length of stay:

We have both been to eachothers [sic] house. (R32)

Several have visited my home or I have traveled to see them. (R227)

Others mentioned online friends coming to stay at their home, or staying with online friends, sometimes for extended periods of time:

One friend has stayed over for about a week twice. (R256)

I've met two friends virtually (on a message board) who have since become some of my closest friends, coming to stay with me for a month. (R342)

Respondent 59 mentioned an online friend from the USA. After several telephone conversations, she and her family met up with him when they were there on holiday.

The following year he came to the UK and stayed with myself, hubby and my two sons for just over 3 weeks. (R59)

5.15.2 Meeting family and friends

The idea of integrating online friendships into face-to-face social networks is one which is inherent in this research. Society has changed significantly over the last 50 years, with many families becoming dispersed as a result of members moving away for education and employment; people are increasingly choosing to have “families of choice”, where individuals create their own close support network of friends rather than blood relations. Choosing to integrate online friendships into those networks, to whatever extent, demonstrates their importance and legitimacy to those involved.

A few respondents reported online friends attending family events such as barbecues, Christmas celebrations, and birthday parties:

On my birthday [...] I had five online friends come to stay and also seven “real life” friends. (R42)

Mentions of husbands, partners and children meeting online friends were common, as were stories of regular get-togethers with children:

We are very involved with each other’s families, as our children are of a similar age. I take my family to visit, and she brings hers here. We buy each other’s kids Christmas presents etc. (R249)

Several respondents reported friendships being created between their online friends and their family or offline friends. In some cases this is for practical or caregiving purposes:

my sister and an online friend share contact info in case anything happens to me. (R234)

I have had telephone contact with one of her sons many times, when she was ill. (R104)

Other respondents’ stories clearly demonstrate a high level of affection between their ‘real life’ friends and family and their online friends:

I live on the other side of the planet now but she still visits my parents and my sister without me (R278)

One online friend [...] I have met up with several times, both in America where she lives and in England where I do; through me she is now also friends with many of my real-life friends (including meeting up with them too in rl). (R336)

However, not all respondents were entirely positive about the idea of their online friends meeting their family:

None of my friends have met my family, are you crazy? (R123)

5.15.3 Face-to-face meetings

The development of an online friendship into one involving face-to-face meetings is often seen as a natural progression; a path to a ‘genuine’ friendship. However, although a lot of respondents mentioned meeting, or wanting to meet, their online friends, there were only a few who implied that a meeting was necessary to cement the friendship:

I have met in person many people that I first knew on Twitter. [...] There are a few of us who met this way in my home town and we now see each other so often that we consider ourselves “real” friends. (R172)

Relatively few respondents reported meeting their online friends on a frequent basis; those who did usually mentioned that their friend happened to live locally. Several people reported monthly meet-ups with friends originally met online, usually based around common interests.

Less frequent meetings, usually three or four times per year, seemed to be more common:

I have at least half a dozen good friends whom I originally met online, and now see at least several times a year in person (they live in other parts of the U.S.) (R108)

I’ve known one guy for over ten years and we meet regularly every few months, depending on money. (R138)

I had a buddy on WLR who lived quite near and we decided to meet for coffee. We have a lot in common and have continued to meet up every 3 months or so. (R98)

5.15.3.1 Group get-togethers

Regular meetings are not only conducted within dyadic friendships; in online communities based around a common interest friendships are often created between a group of individuals rather than just between two. This is partly because these communities encourage public participation rather than private

communication, and often the social norms which have been established mean that cliques and in-jokes are disapproved of and sometimes actively opposed.

This means that these subject- or interest-based communities can foster strong group friendships. Respondent 92 had been quite lonely and isolated, working from home in a rural area and with little social contact except for her husband and children, until she joined LiveJournal in 2008 and found a group of like-minded people:

Soon there was an opportunity for a meet up, just for drinks in a pub. Going there was the most nervewracking but exciting thing I had done in years. They were real, and they were lovely. (R92)

This is not an unusual story. Individuals have formed group friendships within online communities devoted to, among others, fandom, motherhood, hillwalking, cooking and gaming. The structure of the group appears to remain consistent, rather than splitting up into smaller groups or dyads.

I met a bunch of other mothers on the [...] group, and some of us migrated to LiveJournal. This was about 9 years ago. These people are closer than many of my RL friends. (R150)

The same group of our friends has had a gathering every January for the last six years. (R298)

5.15.4 Holidays

Twenty-eight respondents reported taking holidays with their online friends, either alone or as part of a group. For friends who are geographically distant and who have most of their regular contact online or by telephone, a holiday provides the opportunity to spend an extended period of time together. Respondent 66 met an online friend in person when they happened to be in the same city at the same time:

we went out to eat, talked like mad and became fast friends. That was 7 years ago. We [...] go somewhere once a year, just the two of us. We [leave] our hubbies home. It's been great. (R66)

Where respondents have children of similar ages, or where their partners get on well, holidays together become more of a family event:

Our partners and children get on well and we have family holidays together. (R326)

5.15.4.1 Group holidays

Group holidays, as with the group get-togethers, tend to stem from common interest communities. Just over half of the reports of group holidays given in the answers to Question 12 are from people who met through online fandom –

We're a group that's been meeting once a year since 2005. It started out as a fannish gathering over a weekend and have now developed to a week-long get-together with friends. (R79)

– though it is clear that the interests which brought the groups together are not necessarily those which keep them together:

a group of ladies I vacation with every year [...]. I never would have met them if our fannish pursuits had not meshed at one point (fannishly, we've since gone our separate ways, but personally we are still together). (R232)

5.15.5 Common interests

Common interests were frequently mentioned by respondents as an element of their online friendships:

The best relationships are those with whom I have common interests in Real Life. (R99)

and the experience of meeting through one interest and then finding more on which to build or enhance the friendship was frequently mentioned:

We got together originally to allow the dogs to socialise, but found we had far more in common and are now, 9 years later, extremely close friends. (R129)

Twenty-eight respondents specifically mentioned meeting online friends through fandom. Although it is becoming more mainstream, with academic conferences and journals devoted to transformative culture (“Transformative Works”, 2013), fandom is still for some a private practice; something which is not openly acknowledged. This is perhaps most true for writers of fan fiction¹¹, and particularly those who write more

¹¹ Fan fiction (or fanfic) is the term used to describe “amateur works based on the characters and settings from novels, movies, television shows, plays, videogames or pop songs” (Alter, 2012).

esoteric (for want of a better term) fan fiction such as slash (pairing two, or more, characters of the same sex).

I think that there is a bond that was created by the titular nature of the slash fiction we read and write. Once you admit to participation in something that is basically taboo in polite society there is an openness that takes place. (R229)

Shared interests have always been a significant factor in the creation of friendships. Before the advent of the Internet it was difficult, if not impossible, to make contact with people with similar interests who were geographically distant; nowadays it is easy to find individuals or communities based around specific topics, and connections made this way can be incredibly strong.

I am deeply attached to these women. Fandom brought us together but friendship keeps us together. [...] It was easier to talk to these women because there was a common ground, we began with the show but ended up talking about everything. (R229)

Perhaps it is sometimes more true that making online friends through common interests leads to the creation of an entirely new offline social group, rather than that those friends are integrated into participants' existing social networks.

5.15.6 The impact of distance

For many respondents, regular meetings are not possible due to time and distance, particularly when their friends are on a different continent. In some cases this does not affect the level of affection felt:

With distance and time zone differences, we still interact more online than offline, but I still consider them close friends. (R38)

I don't get to see them often. However, they're up-to-date on my daily life, and when we do get to meet in person, it's exactly the same as talking to the person online; we continue an existing and rich conversation. (R157)

Where respondents mention the lack of face-to-face meetings with their online friends, there is often a sense of yearning for that extra dimension:

neither of those are "regular" parts of RL, because the distances are too great. They would be, if we were closer. (R170)

For those respondents whose online friends happened to be local, the difficulties of meeting in person were negated:

One has become one of my best friends after meeting online (who also lived very locally). (R9)

Respondent 353 ran a discussion forum which led to meetings with people from the city she lived in, as well as from further afield:

I also met a few people from abroad through the discussion forum particularly a girl from Australia who has come to the UK to visit me twice and a guy from Utah who has come to the UK to visit me twice and I have been out to Utah to visit him once. (R353)

Although distance is certainly an obstacle, in some cases it is not one which is, or is allowed to become, insurmountable. Respondent 51 travels to England from the United States twice a year to visit an online friend. Respondent 254 met her best friend online (this is not an uncommon occurrence, as can be seen from Section 5.15.9 below):

She & her husband have been to our home a few times. The visits aren't regular, as she's in the UK and I'm in the US, but when they get enough credit card miles built up, either they both come or just she comes to visit. (R254)

5.15.7 Making a life with online friends

Several respondents stated that the majority of their friends, in whatever context, were originally made online. Respondent 153 estimated that three-quarters of her social circle were people whom she originally met online, and Respondent 307 said that

almost all the friends I have now were met online, and at least three of them have been friends for over 10 years. (R307)

There were also several stories of creating a new social circle from, or as a result of, the friendships made online:

Built an entire social circle from LJ friends when I moved to a new community. (R64)

When I moved [...], the final decision on which of three potential cities I was going to relocate to was heavily influenced by the number of online friends I had in each city. (R86)

A few years ago, when I moved away from the town I grew up in, I moved to the area that I did because I knew a bunch of people who lived there, people I'd met online. (R321)

Again, it may be true that for some people, the creation of a new face-to-face social circle is a significant positive result of making online friends.

A number of respondents had also lived with their online friends. Respondent 143, at the time of completing the questionnaire, was about to move across the USA to live with “three online friends who’ve become part of my chosen family”. There were a number of reports of becoming roommates with friends originally met online:

I met [her] online and then later moved from Utah to Washington to move in with her, and we were roommates for nearly 5 years until she moved [...] for her PhD. (R311)

and also of online friends offering temporary shelter. Respondent 280 was staying with an online friend for a month at the time that she completed the questionnaire, and Respondent 298, having finished her undergraduate studies,

moved across the continent to live on a friend’s couch for six months until I got on my feet in her town. (R298)

5.15.8 An important relationship

A significant theme which has emerged from the answers to Question 12 is the importance that online friendships can have to those who experience them. As can be seen from the stories above, online friends have been housemates, fellow enthusiasts, and have formed ready-made social networks: they have also, as will be shown in this section, been enormously important to each other and have provided support at some of the most difficult and enjoyable times in each other’s lives.

Respondent 51, who lives in the United States, said that her

extended family has grown used to the fact that my best friend lives in England, and will be part of my life long term. This is a relationship that was established in 1996 and is still going strong. It is a same sex, platonic relationship, but is the most important one in my life. (R51)

Her story is not unusual. Respondent 229, who formed a group friendship with six women via a television fandom, said that despite the differences between them in age, background and lifestyle, they share a deep friendship.

We grieve when one of us loses a family member, celebrate when someone gets married or graduates. We are emotionally invested in each others lives. [...] I have a confidence now because I’ve been able to explore who I am and

what is important to me by talking with them, writing with them, sharing with them. (R229)

Sometimes this level of trust and friendship does not come easily. Respondent 402, who had met friends through support and advice forums, found that meeting in person altered the way that she related to them, having begun the relationship in what was perceived as a safe space where participants felt protected by their anonymity.

However over time that has concerned me less and I have really come to value the friendships I've made online and feel more comfortable managing the distinction. (R402)

Several respondents noted that their online friends are as important, or are seen in the same way, as their offline friends:

I don't really distinguish between online friends and other good friends. (R108)

By this time I no longer really find it unusual to meet people online and then integrate them into real life. (R278)

This [online friends becoming a regular part of 'real life'] has happened often enough that it's just a basic feature of my life. (R320)

5.15.8.1 Providing help and support

Another important element in the measurement or evaluation of friendship is the willingness to help the other person, and to be helped in return. Some respondents provided examples of this. Respondent 104 has a close online friend who has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and this has led to an extra depth in their friendship:

She trusts me to tell her when she appears to be becoming ill, as she cannot judge, at times. She always rings me when she suspects that she is becoming irrational. (R104)

She added that her friend has also helped her with personal problems.

Respondent 384 wrote that she has become close friends with several members of online communities; one of them had recently been diagnosed with terminal cancer, and "a group of us have become part of her support network".

Perhaps the most extreme example of help and support which was provided in the questionnaire was this:

One of my oldest online friends actually attended the birth of my second child, coming to stay a week before my due date and leaving two weeks later (five days after I had my baby). She's seen me naked and screaming in labor! (R284)

5.15.8.2 Significant life events

Other than childbirth, another significant life event for which online friends were present was marriage. Twenty-two respondents reported being invited to an online friend's wedding or inviting online friends to their own.

Respondent 258, who said that she has few friends who are not family or originally met online, had a wedding almost entirely populated by online friends:

Our best man, flower girl, bride's maid and 95% of the attendees [...] were originally met online. (R258)

Respondent 38 travelled from the UK to the USA to attend several of his online friends' weddings. Respondent 291 was the maid of honour at the wedding of one of her "online best friends", and Respondent 336 met some of her online friends in person for the first time at the wedding of another online friend.

However, only one respondent was able to say that they had actually performed the ceremony:

I was privileged to be the officiant for the wedding of two friends I met online. (R316)

5.15.9 Creating closeness online

As is clear from the comments in Section 5.15.8 above, many respondents reported extremely close and meaningful relationships with their online friends, in some cases the made-online friends overtaking offline friends in terms of closeness.

Respondent 59 met a man on the eHarmony dating site, but they “both knew before [they] met for real that it was for friendship only”. She is in contact with him on a weekly basis, and says that they are

very close as friends, and can discuss anything and everything with each other with no fear of embarrassment, criticism [*sic*] or being judged. (R59)

Again, a lack of regular face-to-face contact does not seem to have a detrimental effect on the closeness felt by respondents:

[she] has become a particularly close friend over the years, and although we meet rarely in the flesh, we probably have more contact than many other more conventional friendships. (R124)

5.15.9.1 Best friends

Twenty eight respondents wrote that their “best” or “closest” friend was someone whom they had originally met online, whether or not they meet regularly in person.

My closest friend is one I met online in 2005; she and I “speak” nearly every day via IM, have met in person on half a dozen different occasions, and my son and I stayed with her family for six weeks in 2007 when we took an extended holiday in England. (R86)

One of my absolute best friends is someone I met online about six years ago. She and I have a great deal in common [...] We have spent hours on the phone as well as visits in person across state lines. I believe she knows me better than many of my coworkers or casual acquaintances, and knows me at least as well as some of my close ‘real life’ friends. (R315)

Respondent 326 joined an online community for new mothers, and made friends with a group of women who were spread across the UK.

One of these actually has become my very best friend, and despite living [a significant distance apart], we actually opened a business together and she is going to be my bridesmaid next year when I am married. (R326)

The final words in this section come from Respondent 229, who has had an incredibly positive experience as part of a close group friendship:

We care about each other and actually love each other as sisters would. I tell them “I love you” when I am ready to hang up the phone and I mean it. [...] They truly play an integral part of my life and I never would have met them if it weren’t for the internet. (R229)

5.16 Summary

This chapter discussed the results obtained from the primary, quantitative phase of data collection. 433 people from 25 countries responded to the online questionnaire, of whom 60% were resident in the UK and 28% in the USA. There was a significant gender imbalance among the questionnaire respondents: 73% were female and 25% were male. This makes it difficult to make any gender-based comparisons between these groups.

Questionnaire invitations were distributed using convenience sampling, and respondents were asked to pass the message on to others, thereby encouraging further snowball sampling. This was moderately successful: each initial invitation message contained a unique URL, and these were correlated with the locations in which respondents stated that they had seen the message. It was clear from cross-tabulation of these results that some respondents had received the invitation from a source other than the initial distribution location: for example, 21 had received it from a friend or relative, 20 had received it by email, and eight had seen it on a LiveJournal community.

A significant majority (81%) of respondents stated that they had made friends with someone originally met online, and most had gone on to meet at least one online friend in person. The overwhelmingly positive responses to these questions may have been due to the wording of the invitation, although it had been written in a way that was intended to encourage people who had not made friends online to respond, as well as those who had.

Comparing results from the UK and the USA, the percentage of respondents who were members of Facebook and Flickr were fairly similar. Some online social networks were less popular in the UK than in the USA, including email lists and Twitter; however, LinkedIn was slightly more popular in the UK. A lower percentage of UK respondents stated that they had made friends online (73.6%, compared to 91.7% of those from the USA): they were correspondingly less likely to meet an online friend in person (71% versus 90%). Asked about the integration of online friends into offline life by, for example, becoming part of an established social network, UK respondents were almost equally split, with 50.4% answering 'Yes'; US respondents were more likely to have done so, with 68% answering 'Yes'. Although membership of the most popular online social networking sites is relatively equal for respondents from the UK and the USA, there appears to be more

reticence on the part of UK respondents when it comes to making friends online and subsequently meeting them in person and introducing them to family and other friends.

The likelihood of making friends online grew as the number of hours spent online increased; similarly, the more OSNs to which a respondent belonged, the more likely they were to have made an online friend. Women were more likely to move an online friend into their offline, everyday life.

The free text answers given to Question 12 illustrated the wide range of friendships experienced by the respondents, and the importance that they hold, whether they remain entirely online, are met in person on an infrequent basis, or whether they are integrated into respondents' everyday family and friend circles. It is clear from these comments that online friends can be as vital to individuals' wellbeing and happiness as those relationships which are made and maintained face-to-face.

The following two chapters discuss the data obtained from the face-to-face interviews, and relate the resultant themes to the research objectives.

Chapter Six

The “Digital Dividend”: Friendship in Online Social Networks

This and the following chapter report and discuss the data obtained from the face-to-face interviews undertaken in the second phase of the research. The previous chapter reported on the quantitative results obtained from the online questionnaire. Having analysed the quantitative data, potential interviewees were identified using the answers to questions which had been chosen as interview indicators, as well as demographic information such as gender and location.

Altogether, 52 questionnaire respondents from England and Wales were invited to take part in an interview and 36 interviews were conducted. Each of the interviewees has been given a gender-appropriate pseudonym. The majority of these were randomly selected using an online baby name generator (<http://www.babynames.co.uk>), although five participants requested a specific name to be used. Where the initials “SKM” appear in an excerpt from a transcript, they refer to the interviewer.

This chapter addresses themes relating to the first two research objectives: it reports on how the interviewees used social networking sites and how their behaviour varied between different sites. It discusses the ways in which interviewees had created friendships online, and their attitudes towards online friendship in general.

6.1 The Interviews

Of the 36 interviewees, 23 were female and 13 were male. They represented the age ranges from 25-34 to 65 and over. The only age range which was not represented was 18-24; only two respondents in that group volunteered to be interviewed and were in an appropriate location, and neither of them was available. The interviewees lived in a variety of different areas, ranging from large cities to extremely rural and isolated locations.

The length of interviews varied greatly, from 16 minutes to over 100 minutes. The transcript formatting guide can be found in Appendix E, and example pages from transcripts in Appendices M and N.

6.2 Interviewees' Internet Usage and Online Behaviour

The interviewees were fairly evenly split in their use of the Internet, with one-third of them identifying as heavy users (online for more than 30 hours per week), one third as moderately heavy users (online for between 20 and 30 hours per week) and the remaining third using the Internet for between 5 and 20 hours per week. However, differences in online usage are not only measured by the length of time spent online; the type of sites visited regularly and overall approach to being, and interacting, online may also have an impact on individuals' attitudes and behaviour.

Half of the interviewees had had access to the Internet since 1995 or earlier; the only one who had had access for less than 10 years was Peggy, who had been online since 2008. Several worked or had backgrounds in IT and had been early adopters of new technology for most of their lives, although, as Saskia pointed out, in the early days

you typed everything in the command line [...] and you didn't really use it for friendship much, because it was jolly hard work. (Saskia)

Several interviewees were self-employed, and therefore found it difficult to differentiate between being online for work and for fun, since they tended to mix and match throughout the day. The same was true for some of the employed interviewees, who used social networking sites (SNSs) throughout the day for professional purposes, which is of course difficult to separate out from personal interactions without using separate accounts.

I get interesting things through my Facebook, because some of it is work as well as family. And to be honest I think this whole-- It's stupid, having a divide between different applications, because it's all part of my online persona, and it's all part of me keeping up to date. (Kendra)

6.2.1 Use of online social networks

Facebook was by far the most popular online social network (OSN) mentioned in the online questionnaire, with 83% of respondents as members. The majority of interviewees were active users of Facebook, though four (Henry, Lydia, Tanya and Veronica) did not use it at all. Henry and Veronica had concerns about security and privacy on Facebook, while Lydia and Tanya both seemed to consider it to be a frivolous site, which they had no desire to join:

I still regard the Internet largely as a tool, and something to *use* rather than something to just purely play with. (Lydia)

Three interviewees – Edwin, Quenna and Declan – named Facebook as their only OSN. Edwin was a moderately heavy user, spending between 20 and 30 hours a week online, on average, socialising and gaming on Facebook, while Quenna and Declan were both light users.

The second most common OSN mentioned by interviewees was email lists, although the majority of these were used for the sharing or consumption of information rather than for general discussion or interaction. With the exception of the interviewees who had migrated online interactions from one type of OSN onto a private email list (discussed in Section 6.6.5), only three reported having had face-to-face meetings with people first encountered on email lists. Tanya was a member of several lists, predominantly fandom-related, and had made a number of friends and acquaintances through those lists; April had had several meetings with someone whom she contacted via Freecycle, although it did not develop into a friendship; and Arthur had met with fellow football fans at an away match, having arranged the meeting on the team's fans' mailing list.

Nearly two-thirds of the interviewees were members of LinkedIn, although only a few made use of the interest-based discussion groups available on the site. Most declared a lack of understanding of the value of LinkedIn to them if they were not actively looking for employment:

I don't know if it's doing me any good, but I'm fairly sure it's not doing me any harm, so... (Andrew)

I don't know why I'm on LinkedIn – I never, ever go on it and it sends me spam messages as far as I'm concerned. (Francis)

Several interviewees stated that they use LinkedIn to keep in touch with previous work colleagues; people who they did not feel were close enough friends that they would want to Friend them on Facebook, but who they wished to maintain a connection with. LinkedIn was seen as an equivalent to their previous face-to-face interaction:

I've just created a presence and connected to people that I used to work with so that I've got a way of messaging them. There's my not-so-close work colleagues, the people who-- I still like to maintain a link. But I'm not that close. We didn't go out and party when I worked with them, particularly, except for work-orientated dos, so I'm not that social with them. (Kendra)

So I'm keeping business people at arm's length from my Facebook. Unless I'm friends with them. So I can keep an eye on what's going on in the business world, with people I [...] maybe want to just keep in touch with. (Kenton)

Fewer than half of the interviewees were members of Twitter, and of those who were, half described themselves as non-active or very occasional users:

I follow people on Twitter, but I don't tweet, because who wants to know that actually I've decided to put my left sock on first, before my right one? (Peggy)

I've never tweeted in my life, so I'm-- I've got a Twitter account, but I'm not-- I wouldn't say I'm a Twitter user. (Arthur)

Twitter lends itself more to the use of multiple accounts, although the people who had both a professional and a personal account seemed to find that they used them in diametrically different ways: for example, Hermione posted regularly from her professional account, but tended to use her personal one for "getting info in" rather than posting.

Again, Twitter is a useful site, due to its intrinsic openness¹², for people to use to keep in touch with former colleagues or with professional contacts; because of the publicness of tweets there is less perceived obligation to share personal information, as there is on Facebook.

6.2.2 Using filters in online environments

Most online social networks allow members to filter the messages they see or the people to whom their posts are visible. Facebook allows users to group their Friends into different categories and to specify which groups an update is visible to; it also allows users to 'mute' some or all of their Friends' posts, selecting the type of update (e.g. game progress or posting of photographs) they wish to see or ignore. LinkedIn also allows users to mute posts from selected individuals, in a similar way to Facebook. Twitter does not allow selective posting, although if an account is changed from public to protected that means that only 'approved followers' (people who have been confirmed by the Twitter user as followers) can see the tweets. It is, however, possible to filter the posts which are visible on a user's timeline, by creating lists of selected users: for example, a list of PhD students or librarians.

¹² The majority of Twitter accounts are open and can be read by anyone, including non-members; approximately 11% of accounts are protected, or private (Beevolve, 2012).

None of the interviewees used Facebook's filtering technology when posting updates. Although Bella said that she was intending to split her Facebook Friends into a "wider Friends group" and one including "intimate Friends, really good Friends", the general consensus seemed to be that it was too much trouble to use filtering tools. However, an element of unofficial filtering, or pre-Friending filtering, was evident:

I do that at the Friending stage – if I don't want them seeing what I put on there, then they don't become a Friend. (Peggy)

I take a view that anything I post on Facebook is going into the public domain. Therefore [...] there is nothing I post where I want one group of people not to see it, even though I don't mind about another group. (Arthur)

I don't have, on Facebook, any Friends who are, or work for, the clients that I work for. The only relationship I have with them online is LinkedIn. So I do separate things like that. (Graham)

Veronica and Lydia, neither of whom used Facebook, were both active users of LiveJournal and both made use of that site's filtering functionality. LiveJournal allows filtered posting at several levels: completely public, or limited to people listed as Friends or to specific groups named by the user. It also allows filtered reading of others' posts: users can group Friends or communities into categories and can limit their reading page to only posts within those categories. Veronica's filtering was very limited:

I have got a filter for mutual real life friends, but that I've only ever used for things like announcing-- for more in detail birth announcements, with my children's actual names, things like that. (Veronica)

Lydia made more use of the multi-level filtering possible within the site:

I've got three levels. Most of the time it's at a Friends level, so if I've Friendened someone they can actually read it. Then there's a smaller subset, who are the close friends, and then an even smaller subset, with whom I would only talk about really, really personal stuff. (Lydia)

Another interviewee who made use of filtering was Torsten, who, in addition to his full-time job, is a published author and, as a result, has made the decision to use his author persona on most of his OSNs; he has a very limited online presence under his real name. This affords him a level of protection from and control over his interaction with his readers and fans, without affecting his ability to socialise online with his 'real life' friends. In order to facilitate this, the majority of his online socialising takes

place on Google Plus. When asked whether he had considered using Facebook and taking advantage of their filtering functionality, he said that he “just [didn’t] *trust* Facebook for that, for some reason”.

On the Google products you can share things with limited groups of people, so [...] I have things which I share with people I physically know, people who I know who are-- I also group people into ‘Readers’ – they’re people who read me and therefore know me – but I also have ‘Friends’ who are actual friends, and ‘Family’ who are actual family, and a bunch of people who are kind of ‘Associates’. (Torsten)

Torsten and Ivor were the only interviewees who actively used Google Plus; although a number of other participants were members, none of them had “got off the ground with” it (Henry).

6.2.3 Being private online

Although Facebook can be locked down, with privacy settings controlling who can see users’ posts, all of the interviewees seemed to be aware that their control over who sees their content is only one level deep: if A posts something which B comments on, B’s friends may be able to see both the comment and the original post. Although the act of pre-Friending filtering allows users to be fairly open, since they have already made the decision that those who see their posts can be trusted, there was a definite awareness among the interviewees that private and public are not as well separated online as they are offline.

Edwin, although he was a very active and open member of Facebook, who frequently interacted with strangers within the context of Facebook games, was cautious about the content he posted:

I’m actually probably quite guarded about what photographs that I *would* put onto Facebook, because I consider that open to the world, really. (Edwin)

He described Facebook as a risk-free environment, because of the ease of cutting off any undesired interaction:

You can go in and be Friends to everybody. If somebody’s sarky or abusive to you, it’s click of the button, “Bye, don’t need to see you again”. It’s very, very easy. (Edwin)

Ivor explained that his online behaviour had changed significantly over the past few years. Having initially tried to maintain his separate identities online – professional,

personal, political and familial – he gradually changed his online behaviour until he had a single online identity, but with “multiple components – things I do in different boxes”. Throughout this evolution, he has retained his belief in the necessity of discretion online.

You just, you maintain discretion in all things [...] there’s a whole sort of core of discretion that I would never let out into the online world with anybody, because you just wouldn’t do it. Or I wouldn’t. (Ivor)

All of the interviewees, no matter how positive their own experiences had been, were aware of the need for discretion and of the limitations of online interaction. This is discussed in more detail in Section 6.3.1 below.

6.3 Not Made Friends Online

Nine of the 36 interviewees stated that they had not made a friend online. The reasons for this included: awareness of the potential for deception online; being a very light user and spending too little time online for it to happen; preferring to meet someone in person first; and having an overall negative impression of the concept of online friendship.

6.3.1 Caution online

The concept of being cautious and discreet online is one which was mentioned by most of the interviewees, sometimes in relation to a specific site – most frequently Facebook – and sometimes more generally.

I don’t trust Facebook because of the chequered history they’ve had with privacy settings. I don’t like the grey areas that there are between public and private on Facebook. I don’t like the way that they’ve changed their settings, and made it arguably deliberately difficult to know what is secret and what is public. (Henry)

Kendra was a fairly heavy user of SNSs, and was eloquent about the different levels of openness she allows on the various platforms she uses. She was particularly cautious about the posting of photographs:

I’ve got it pretty much locked down as tight as I can manage it and understand within Facebook’s settings on that. But even so, I am conscious that it could be available, so I don’t put photos of my daughter on Facebook, particularly. I’m very conscious that I have a private life that is private, that I want to share with the people that I know. I don’t want to share it with strangers. Why would I? (Kendra)

Tanya, although she had made several friends through email lists, still had a sense of caution about online interaction:

Tanya: I don't actually trust online, because you never know what the person's going to be like, until you've known them for a while.

SKM: But you still consider people that you *only* know online to be friends?

Tanya: But I've chatted to them a lot, and they've sent me pictures and exchanged things, so--

She felt that there had to be mutual sharing, preferably instigated by the other party, before she could start to think of someone met online as "friend".

Torsten's decision to close most of the social networking accounts he held in his own name and to open some in his author name was motivated initially by a desire to protect his son.

Particularly, at the time [my son] was quite young and I didn't want people connecting him with me as a writer, because some of what I write might be controversial, people might not like it, and I don't want them giving *him* a hard time about it. So that was really my motive. (Torsten)

6.3.1.1 Deceit online

I think people pretend to be what they're not, online. Not all of them, but some of them. And consequently you can't trust what people say online, because they may be completely different when you meet them. (Torsten)

One of the reasons given by interviewees for being cautious online was the potential for deceit in an anonymous interaction. Hermione, who had made a friend online and also met that friend in person, nonetheless had significant reservations about the idea of having a "friend that was solely online": she felt that the lack of face-to-face contact and visible body language would make it difficult.

I think there's always that part in the back of your head – you think, is that person really who they say they are? (Hermione)

Although she believed that it could be possible to make good friends online, to whom one could go for conversation and a limited amount of support, she felt that the building of trust online would be, if not impossible, then a slow process.

James blamed his age on his reluctance to make friends online – “it just feels completely alien”, but then went on to say that he couldn’t

assess somebody just from an online profile – well, the press is full of it, isn’t it, when people create completely false profiles? (James)

Declan agreed:

For a start, it is terribly easy to pretend to be lots of things you aren’t online. Obviously, in gross ways – like middle-aged men pretending to be little girls, kind of stuff – but more particularly in relatively subtle ways, you can misrepresent yourself. (Declan)

Kendra was uncomfortable with the idea of making friends with someone she had not met, because she relies heavily on her gut instinct when deciding to let people in to her close social circle.

I want to meet people and see how my gut feels, whether I think I would-
- Because you portray a different side of yourself online, I think. It’s not necessarily the true representation – it may be an aspect of you, but there may be other aspects that are stronger in reality, that may not gel. (Kendra)

While it is certainly true that it is very easy to present an untrue version of oneself online, it is also the case that many people, without any intention to deceive, use their online persona to foreground an aspect of their personality; an aspect that they may be unable or unwilling to show to others in everyday life. This is discussed briefly in Section 7.1 below.

Faye had had personal experience of being deceived online. She is part of a close-knit group of mothers, who met initially on a large forum but have since split off into their own group and set up a small, invitation-only forum. One of the early members of the new group began to post about her child being ill, and then about the death of the child, and the funeral.

And we were all ever so sad – devastated, we were – because, you know, you get to know these people and you think--
It’s heartbreaking being told that a child’s died, whether you know them or not. And then, I don’t know how it came out, but she was proven to be a fake, and she hadn’t had a kid at all. Photos were fake-- Photos on Facebook were fake. She’d set a whole fake life up for herself. And she just disappeared, and went and was never heard again. And then, after that we’ve been really, really careful, you know. We only let people into the forum if they are known personally by someone or if we’ve met them

or somebody's met them. We don't really want to get mixed up with that again. (Faye)

6.3.2 Limitations of online interaction

Even without factoring in the possibility of being deceived on the Internet, there are other limitations to interacting online which affect individuals' ability or willingness to make friends in an online community. A significant concern about online interaction, ever since the earliest days of online communities in the form of bulletin boards and Usenet, has been the lack of visual and verbal cues such as body language and tone of voice; many people believe that without these cues, meaningful social interaction and the development of meaningful relationships cannot occur.

Because so much of human interaction is through body language and subtle signals like clothing and gesture, that-- You're not getting that online, which in some ways is a relief, but in other ways is limiting the potential of any relationship, I think. (Isla)

Several interviewees specifically mentioned that they felt that a sense of humour was not easily shared online:

Yeah. I think smileys can only go so far. If someone makes a joke that's possibly in bad taste, but you know them, you would tend to know how it was meant, whereas if it's just the plain text and you've got nothing else to contrast it with, or you haven't got any experience of that person, it's harder to know what they intended by the joke. (Carl)

I think what's [...] not necessarily there online is actually humour and joking. Not that we don't make jokes online, but just that sort of, saying something that's funny and laughing or smiling, and going on to the next thing. Or telling a story, or something that's happened, and laughing over it. You know, that's almost more-- You know, the telling of something secret or the explaining of something intimate – you can sort of do, in words. I mean, sometimes you might need a hug or something, I suppose, but it's-- yeah, it's the laughing, really. (Bella)

The lack of physical contact, of the ability to give or be given a hug, was also mentioned by several interviewees:

Someone online can be there, but they can't give you-- necessarily give you the support, the pat on the back-- Well, they can say that, can go "Great! Well done!" but it's not the same. It doesn't-- How do you get emotion through the computer? So, you can't get that. And putting a smiley face on or making noise – it's like, when you get "Hrrrr" or... Yeah. You can't get that, whereas if you're talking to someone, you know, speaking with them. You can hear the frustration, you can respond back to them. (Peggy)

The increase in use over the past few decades of shorthand emotional cues within social networking sites, such as emoticons (smileys), seems to have somewhat decreased the general discomfort with online interaction although, as can be seen above, it has not completely disappeared. The ability to include an icon indicating a wink or a grin within a text message helps to reduce uncertainty about the intentions of the sender. Despite this, text-based communication will always be significantly limited in comparison to face-to-face interaction, and thus may cause interviewees to have reservations about the quality of the relationships they build online.

6.3.2.1 Having reservations

For some people, the reservations they feel about their online connections can be resolved by meeting in person. This relates to the levels of caution which some interviewees talked about using online, but can also be connected to a need to move through a series of steps in order to deepen the friendship (Parks & Roberts, 1997; Whitty & Gavin, 2001; Whitty & Joinson, 2008). Tanya (quoted in Section 6.3.1 above) mentioned that, while she is generally cautious about online friendship, she could consider someone to be a friend after a lot of interaction and sharing of information and other items such as pictures.

There was a sense that some interviewees would take a friendship up to a certain point online, but would not commit to truly considering someone a friend until they had met in person:

SKM: Would you have called them 'friends' before you met them in person?

Andrew: It's always a difficult one, whether you call somebody a friend, a colleague or an acquaintance. Um. Sort-of friends. I mean, they're not friends in the sense that your actual personal friends are, and you might-- people are so different on forums anyway, to when you meet them, aren't they? Both ways? But yes. Sort of-- Friends in that sort of way, yeah. Not close friends, just--

I don't think there's a word, really, to describe it. It sort of comes between 'friend' and 'acquaintance', doesn't it?

SKM: Casual friend, maybe?

Andrew: Casual friends, yeah.

SKM: So they could fall into the circle of 'casual friend', but not necessarily to 'good friend'.

Hermione: Not to good friend. I would say 'casual friend', but until you get to know them ... better, and you can judge it, and you can trust them more with-- you can trust them with information, then, yeah.

April, who had met friends of friends online, and subsequently in person, felt that she could, in time, call them 'friend', but that it would take more than one meeting:

SKM: So, would you class them as acquaintances online, where they stand at the moment?

April: Yes.

SKM: You wouldn't say they were friends online, but--

April: Yeah, I'd say they were acquaintances in both respects, because I don't know them that well yet. Two or three of them definitely have the potential to become friends and to become people that I spend time with, as opposed to just spend time chatting with online. I'm not sure if that's a nice distinction to make! (laughter)

Several interviewees, such as James (quoted in Section 6.3.1.1), blamed their age for their reluctance to make friends online, or said that they were "old fashioned":

I don't know, maybe I'm old-fashioned, but one likes to know them a bit more before you decide that they are going to be your friend! (April)

I mean, I'm old fashioned. Actually, I would want to at least have had a phone call with them. (Saskia)

Another reason for interviewees' reservations about making friends online was the dangers inherent in text-based interactions and in sharing information anonymously. As Whitty and Joinson note, the perceived anonymity of online interactions can lead to increased self-disclosure and "hyperhonesty" (2008, p. 2) and this could be problematic.

I think there is an element in online friendships which, because of the anonymity, and because it's not in an open social space, and because people can act as if it's closed and unknown, enables them to let down their barriers and get deeper in a friendship, and that is potentially damaging to relationships.

And this isn't going, "All technology is bad, all online friendships are bad" – I think it's just a different way of starting new friendships, which carries with it risks.

Because you can develop a friendship and you can move it on to a point of intimacy – not physical intimacy, this is about the 'only connect' thing – where you're sharing and talking about things in a way which just

wouldn't be possible [offline]. And without the other parties knowing.
(Brian)

Brian was particularly talking about potential damage to romantic relationships as a result of connecting with someone online. Other interviewees had experienced an online connection misinterpreting what the interviewee considered to be friendship or acquaintanceship as something more: Ruby had been approached by a casual friend via Facebook, who announced that he had separated from his wife and wanted to know if she was currently single. This led to them having

this *bizarre* conversation, that we would *never* have had face-to-face [...]

I can't imagine you standing next to me in the pub talking to me like that – what makes you think you can do it online? And I hadn't spoken to him since about, probably April, May last year. So heaven knows where that came from – there's obviously been something going on in his head. But that's the problem with online stuff, isn't it? A, people can say an awful lot more than they would have the bottle to say, face-to-face, and B, they just don't pick up signals, do they, at all? (Ruby)

6.3.3 No need to make friends online

Several interviewees stated that, while they were not interested in making friends online, they were equally unlikely to make new friends offline, in more 'traditional' ways.

Because I don't feel the need for lots more friends, any time soon, because I've got, as I said, more than I know what to do with, and most of them are in bubbles of my life where they need to be, and I don't feel I need to recruit them, I've got no reason to rush out and meet them, so why should I want to? (Declan)

Yeah, I think you do kind of get full, really, because you build up the friends from pre-kids, and then you build up the friends that are mothers of your kids' friends, the ones that you like, and then you probably change jobs and you get another set of friends. And then it does get to the point where you sound super-saturated, doesn't it, really? (Ruby)

There was also the sense that some people believed that the process of making new friends was simply too time-consuming or would take too much effort:

It's a lot of effort to reach out to somebody that you have no idea, and it's pot luck of whether they're going to be a nutter or not. And I think I don't really feel that desire to gain more friends in that way. (Evelyn)

Although there were interviewees who considered the whole idea of making friends online to be strange, the majority of those who had not done so did not completely rule out the idea that it could happen. Despite their reservations and their caution online, this group of interviewees acknowledged that the rapid changes occurring in society and online, and the possibility of changes to their own lifestyles, could lead to them developing an online friendship in the future.

... inevitably, in the long term, the Internet will evolve into much more of a virtual reality, and I think maybe the way that I would feel about it will be different when it does. (Declan)

I can imagine it ... happening. You know, I can imagine *me* doing it-- [...] You know, I was in touch with people online and I never met them, and I can imagine, if I'd been a better student and spent more time in the forums (laughs) I can imagine forging something that I would think of as a friendship with somebody I've never met. And I probably tend to be more of a lurker than actually contributing myself. And I suppose then-- so I don't get into interactions online as much as some people might. (Olivia)

6.4 A “Straight Line”: Opinions of Online Friendship

An online relationship is-- really, you're only seeing one aspect of a friendship. The friendship with my long-term friends is a web, and the online relationship is a straight line. It's a directional straight line, with-- It'll move through various things, but I don't see that it could be quite so multi-faceted and subtle as a long-term friendship. (Isla)

All of the interviewees, whether they had made friends online or not, were asked for their general opinions about online friendship. The answers showed that the majority of people wished for the reassurance of a face-to-face meeting with someone in order to, as Evelyn put it, “cross the line into the ‘friend zone’”. Such a meeting might be the final step across that line, or it might simply be something which adds value to an already-close relationship.

6.4.1 A theoretical possibility

As mentioned in Section 6.3.3 above, some interviewees who had not made friends online were open to the possibility of doing so. Several mentioned the ease of meeting people who have shared interests within online communities, and the importance of having hobbies or interests in common when beginning or nurturing a friendship.

A while back, I was [online more] and I did make a couple of friends as a result of being online and looking at things that had a mutual interest, sort of – forums and groups and things. And those people are actually now on Facebook with me. So they've kind of migrated from one area of the Internet onto the social networking-- kind of, being friends and keeping up with one another and stuff. So, yes, it is definitely possible to make friends as a result of, perhaps, the mutual interest groups (April)

Well, I've sort of got a policy [against making new friends online]. But there's no need for me to stick to it rigorously. It might well be that a friend of mine says, "Oh, you must meet John sometime – he's a wonderful guy, he does this, that and the other." And I'll think, "Oh, those interests sound interesting to me. I'll send him a message, see if he'd like to be a Friend, tell him what I do. Give him the opportunity." I wouldn't be against that, but it's just never happened. (Graham)

For some people, while they could envisage the possibility of making friends online, they could not do so within the context of their usage at the time of being interviewed. Olivia, for example, described herself as "more of a lurker" than a contributor in the OSNs that she used, and felt that that precluded her from developing a friendship within them. Olivia was a very light Internet user, describing herself as being active online for less than five hours per week, on average. Other light users tended to use the Internet as a tool for activities such as banking and reading RSS feeds, and spent quite limited amounts of time on SNSs such as Facebook and Twitter: Quenna worked long hours and had an active social life, and had no desire to spend her limited free time online; the same was true of Ruby, who also worked long hours and balanced them with being a single parent and doing a lot of work for charity.

6.4.2 "A bit... weird"

Several interviewees used the word "weird" to describe the idea of making friends online:

I think it's weird. Yeah. I go to the pub, you know. I like to meet people face-to-face. (Jade)

Weird. No, because, as I say, they're not-- Because everyone can put a false persona online. (Peggy)

For some interviewees there was a simple lack of understanding of others' need or desire to create friendships online. In some cases this was linked to a sense of self-sufficiency with regard to friendship:

I'm a bit lazy, I suppose. Expecting other people to make the running, and if they don't, well, that's no problem [...] part of the reason for this is I'm self-sufficient. (Graham)

I'm very, very self-sufficient and very, very (pause)-- I could probably count on one hand the amount of times I've gone, "Do you know what – I need your help with this." But I know who I could ask that of. (Ursula)

This connects to the theme of having enough, or too many, friends. Several interviewees simply expressed satisfaction with their current friendship circles, whether large or small, and had no desire to add more people to those circles, either online or offline.

Some interviewees seemed to disapprove of people who spend a lot of time using social networking sites and who do the majority of their socialising online:

It seems to me that some people use Facebook because they haven't actually got any friends, and they're using Facebook as some sort of surrogate. It's a way of having friendship, a community, that otherwise they just wouldn't have, for whatever reason. And they spend time on Facebook because they're at home and friendless and lonely – and maybe not many of those to a great degree, but those are the influences. (Graham)

Minerva, who had made a friend online who was an important part of her life, nonetheless had severe reservations about online friendship generally, and felt that it is not as valuable as 'traditional' friendship. Although she was a moderately heavy Internet user, she did not socialise online, and the close friendship she had made online rapidly moved offline and is maintained via the telephone. She was a member of Facebook but did not use it to any great extent:

I find it very uncomfortable on Facebook. I find what other people say, and comments and things that they put on their Facebook, very strange [...] And I find it really-- I can't see the point, you know. (Minerva)

6.4.3 Online isn't 'real'

The argument that the way that people present themselves, the way they behave, and the relationships which are formed online are not 'real' or true is something which has been discussed in the literature for more than two decades. The majority of interviewees, whether they had made friends online or not, believed that a face-to-face meeting was important, either to confirm or to strengthen a friendship. This links

closely to Section 6.3.1, which discusses the need for caution online and the potential for deceit in anonymous interactions.

Christine wrote on her questionnaire that when she had first discovered a fandom-focused community on LiveJournal, she “could hardly believe the people I ‘met’ online were real, or at least, who they seemed to be”. After she had been a member of the group for a few months, she had the opportunity for a group meeting.

And they were really nice, and they didn’t have two heads – they looked like you and I. And as a result we became friends.

SKM: Okay. And would you say that [it took] the meet-up to make them friends?

Christine: I think it took the meet-up, yeah. I think before that, I obviously knew them and occasionally exchanged comments and stuff, but--

Similarly, Andrew had made quite close connections with people met in common-interest forums, but did not feel comfortable describing them as “normal friends” until he had met them.

It’s almost like a friend, but not quite. But having said that, of course, some of them, when you meet them, they actually do become normal friends, and you keep chatting via the forum and via the email, and the occasional times when you meet up for a gathering. (Andrew)

Nancy had made friends online, although at the time of her interview she had not met them in person. She believed that a certain degree of friendship could be created online, but felt that a face-to-face meeting would cement the friendship and reassure participants of the truth of the relationship.

I think online friendships, unless you can meet them, aren’t as strong. And I think online friendships can reinforce actual friendships, but I think there’s got to be some physical--

SKM: So do you not feel that a real, genuine friendship could be created purely online?

Nancy: I think it could be – or through email – I think it could be. But I think at some point you’d want to just think, Does my concept and my perception of them actually relate to reality?

Several interviewees compared online friendship to having a penpal:

But it's like going back to the days of [having] penpals who you were probably never going to meet because they were usually set up [...] through school, and you were having a foreign correspondence acquaintanceship. (April)

I suppose [it's] the same way as making penpals, and I was never very good at doing penpals. I got bored, quite simply, so I suppose it's the same as doing that. (Peggy)

6.4.4 Other people's opinions

It was not only interviewees who expressed doubts about the reality of online friendships; several people who had made friends online reported comments made by other people about those relationships. Faye, whose online friends are particularly important to her because of her personal circumstances, spoke of her "real" friends' opinions:

You tell people, though, and people seem to look at you gone out, don't they – like, how can you have "friends" that you've met online. But why not? My 'real' friends don't *get* it. They switch off when I talk about my online friends. They don't seem to understand at all why I know these people and why I spend my time talking to them. And I lapse into talking about them – "Oh, you know [Fiona]¹³ on the forum?" And they're like, "No, Faye, I don't know these imaginary people!" And I'm like, "They're not imaginary – I promise you, they're not in my head!" And they don't really get it – they don't understand it at all. (Faye)

She is reassured, though, by the fact that her partner understands and appreciates that the discussions and the arguments which she takes part in online are just as real and important to her as those which occur offline:

he knows that there is that sort of, you can *know* people that you've met online, if you know what I mean. (Faye)

6.5 Different behaviour in different OSNs

Section 6.2 considered the most popular OSNs used by the interviewees, and briefly discussed the behaviour patterns within their Internet usage. It was clear that there were significant differences in the ways that specific OSNs were viewed and used by the interviewees.

Facebook and Twitter, as two of the most widely used social networking sites available, came up in most of the interviews; the majority of interviewees were active users of Facebook, while only nine described themselves as active on Twitter.

¹³ Any names given in square brackets have been anonymised.

A significant difference between the most popular type of accounts on Facebook and on Twitter is the overall level of publicness. Approximately 25% of Facebook accounts are either totally public (readable by anyone, including people who are not members of Facebook) or have their privacy levels set to Friends of Friends (Javelin, 2012): in contrast, only around 11% of Twitter accounts are protected (only visible to Twitter users who have been confirmed by the account holder as a follower with permission to view the account) (Beevolve, 2012). This difference in openness was reflected by some interviewees:

In Facebook, I have my profile locked down to Friends Only. In Twitter I'm open to everyone, and I'm very conscious of the difference between the two, as to what I will put on the two things. (Kendra)

6.5.1 Using Facebook

Interviewees tended to use Facebook to keep up with family and existing friends, rather than for making new friends (see Section 6.6.1):

I tend to use Facebook just to keep up with people I already know, I suppose. Stalking! (laughter) But I use Facebook to sort of keep in touch with relatives – my husband's grown-up nieces and nephews, their doings, and some of my friends. There's some people who were on LiveJournal who kind of moved off it, who've become much more keen on Facebook, and because I don't want to lose contact with them-- and to some extent that's one reason I've gone over to Facebook, just so I can keep contact with those people who I already knew. (Christine)

Peggy was unusual among the Facebook users who were interviewed, in that she chose not to Friend many of her current friends and colleagues:

I don't necessarily Friend friends that I already know. Because I don't want to-- Because there's-- Well, acquaintances, because I don't necessarily want them to see what's going on. (Peggy)

For example, she did not Friend the people who are involved in her main hobby, because she wanted to be able to post about what had happened without worrying about who might see it:

So therefore I can make such comments, vent my fury, as it were, without offending people involved. (Peggy)

Her reason for not Friending current colleagues was slightly different: she was not particularly active online, and saw no value in being Friends online with people that she saw every day. As she said,

if they want to know something they can stick their head over the desk and ask. (Peggy)

In general, interviewees did not make brand-new contacts on Facebook, with the exception of those who had Friended people within the context of playing games (Section 6.6.3), although a number of interviewees mentioned becoming Facebook Friends with someone whom they had come across via a mutual Friend. This can happen fairly frequently on Facebook: if A is Friends with B, A can see all of the comments which have been made on B's post, even those made by people whom A does not know, and A can interact with those people within that comment thread. Assuming that A's and the other users' privacy settings are set to Friends only (the most common setting), this interaction could not occur, or continue, outside that context unless they chose to Friend each other. Most of the interviewees seemed to enjoy the casual interaction afforded by 'meeting' their Friends' Friends within a comment thread, and although some had gone on to Friend those people, for the majority it did not go any further than the thread.

It is quite bizarre, in some ways, because you're having this extended conversation with someone you've never met, and don't know. It's a bit weird. But fun in some ways, because it can take you to funny places. (Kendra)

Some people were uncomfortable with the idea of having a conversation on Facebook with someone with whom they were not directly Friended:

I think I would be rather concerned about somebody-- approaching somebody who was a Friend of a Friend. [...] I think it's easier with something like Twitter, where you can just follow a person and go, actually, I like the things they're saying... (Brian)

In fact, if I don't know anybody at all, I wouldn't comment or anything on it, because it seems a bit weird then. But I know a lot of people do. (Enfys)

6.5.2 Using Twitter

Brian's comment above illustrates the difference between Twitter and Facebook. Since following a Twitter user does not, except in the case of protected accounts, require a reciprocal following, it is easy to use the site as an audience member, rather than a participant. This seemed to be seen both as an advantage and as a disadvantage by the interviewees.

But the nice thing about that was that actually the vast majority of the people that I followed, were [...] actual real people. They weren't spambots and all that nonsense that you get. And so my Twitter stream-- I started to appreciate all that Twitter stream is actually doing, and the way that important things surface in that stream and you can-- and not to worry. (Henry)

I tweeted for a bit, and got bored with tweeting, and decided I couldn't be bothered with tweeting – I don't really want to be compelled to compress things into 140 words [*sic*] and it's all a bit-- I didn't really like the stream of consciousness thing about it. Didn't press my buttons. Didn't go for it. (Declan)

I [joined] and I got about a dozen followers, and I think I tweeted about eight times over the first couple of weeks. And I thought, okay, I'll follow these *two* people, both of whom are science writers. [...] And they did so many tweets, I thought, oh, I haven't looked for 48 hours – oh, my gosh, I really haven't got time to look through these 120 tweets! I'm not going to bother. And I stopped. (Francis)

Overall, Twitter's openness was considered an advantage by those who wanted to follow celebrities or to see links and updates from specific individuals or organisations: for them, Twitter was seen as a broadcaster from which to receive information, rather than a networking site with its implicit requirement to exchange and share information.

At the moment, the biggest group I'm following is to do with the England cricket team [...] So that's more of a curiosity nosey [thing]. (Peggy)

However, Kenton, an active online gamer but quite reserved and compartmentalised in his social networking use, found Twitter's openness to be offputting:

I kind of hold social networking like *that* a little bit at arm's length. I don't know why. So open online-- (Kenton)

6.5.3 Using LinkedIn

Of the 36 interviewees, 22 belonged to LinkedIn. However, only two of them – Brian and Carl – described themselves as active members, both in a professional capacity. Both of them are employed, while also running their own businesses. Brian monitored and occasionally took part in discussion groups which were relevant to both his own business and his employment, while Carl was slightly more active in his use:

We set up our own business last year, so you sort of publish it on LinkedIn, that you're now director of your own business as well, you put your own website, and link back and forth between them. But it's also to do with work, in terms

of administering [...] or posting on groups. And also looking at [profiles, to look for] information that we'd be interested in as an office, as well. (Carl)

Declan and Graham both monitored discussion groups on LinkedIn but had never participated; James participated “infrequently” in order to share professional information, rather than for social interaction. Kendra and Peggy, as noted in Section 6.2.1 above, both used LinkedIn to keep a professional level of contact with their former colleagues.

The remaining interviewees who had joined LinkedIn were split between those who did not know why they had joined or what they should do on it, and those who had uploaded their CV but were not active users and were unlikely to become so unless they were seeking employment.

6.5.4 Finding friends in OSNs

Most of the interviewees mentioned the importance of having interests in common when making or developing friendships and, as Hermione pointed out, some social networking sites are more likely to encourage the discovery of common interests than others:

I would say (pause) looking at the different networks, just to take a comparison of Facebook and Ravelry [large online community for people interested in knitting, crochet, spinning and other fibre-related hobbies], because they're quite similar in that sense – I would say Ravelry's easier to make friends with, because there's a common interest. Whereas Facebook, you might have to go searching for the common interest. But it's already there on somewhere like Ravelry or the Playstation network or something like that. (Hermione)

Arthur felt that the process of making friends was essentially the same online, but that the probability of finding “like-minded people” was higher. He used the example of his son, who,

when he was younger, I would say was socially a bit awkward. Absolute whizz with aspects of IT. Once he found cyberspace communities, he was able to hook up with people with similar interests and intelligence, which in his case is fairly frightening. [...] So I would say in his case, it was going to be harder for him to make friends anyway, and having cyberspace gave him an outlet there that hadn't been there before. (Arthur)

There was also the sense, for some interviewees, that being online filled a social gap that they could not, or perhaps would not, find a way to fill offline. For Christine, Daisy, Lydia, Tanya and Veronica, they found fan communities online in which they could explore their enthusiasm for their various fandoms, in the company of people who were similarly passionate. Francis noted that the people he met online were more likely to be gay than the people he met through his offline hobbies or through work. Faye had made a number of friends via a forum for mothers of disabled children which provides support and advice: as well as making friends on the site, she was able to find out information about equipment and services which she might not otherwise have discovered.

6.6 How friends are made online

The majority of the interviewees said that they had made friends in an online environment, although the degree of friendship varied. Most of those friendships had developed as a result of having hobbies or occupations in common, although there were examples of interviewees meeting people online through mutual friends. Only two interviewees had gone online specifically hoping to make friends or meet new people.

Many online friendships begin as situational friendships, created within the context of a shared interest or a shared community; what Aristotle termed ‘friendships of pleasure’. These connections are, by definition, shallow and can be broken without significant pain to either party: however, in some cases they develop to the point where they become deep friendships which are very important to the individuals involved; Aristotle’s ‘perfect’ friendships.

6.6.1 Making Friends with strangers

It is a truism that anyone whom one has not met before is a stranger; this section deals with the practice of Friending within a social networking site. A common feature of social networking sites is the public articulation of a user’s network of connections (boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211), often known as a Friend List or, for example in Twitter, a Followers List: whether reciprocal Friending or following is required in order to see the other’s posts depends on the site and on the individuals’ account settings.

While some authors have stated that the majority of online connections which are shown in Friend or Followers Lists are connections which already exist offline (Boase & Wellman, 2004; boyd & Ellison, 2008), many people do use OSNs to make friends with people with whom they have no offline connection at all. However, some OSNs are less conducive than others to creating bonds with strangers.

For example, the only interviewees who had Friended a complete stranger on Facebook were those who had done so for the purposes of progressing in one of the games which are hosted on the site (see Section 6.6.3). Generally speaking, interviewees said that it was very unlikely that they would become Facebook Friends with someone whom they had never met in person.

I have never Friended anyone that I haven't already met. I guessed you'd ask me this, and I thought, why wouldn't I? And I think the answer is, I want to know that the people that I'm Friending are... not necessarily 'people like us', but someone I can talk to. [...] So I'd want to meet someone first. And if someone asked to beFriend me, whom I had never met, I would say no. (Graham)

This attitude did not extend to Twitter: because of the different ways in which the two OSNs tend to be used, it was far more common for interviewees to become Twitter followers of complete strangers. For those who were using Twitter as a professional networking tool, following and being followed by a lot of people who work or study in a similar field added to the value; for those who used it in order to have an open and public social networking presence, there was a sense of inclusion in being able to follow strangers and celebrities. Twitter also often inspires in its users the desire to gain as many followers as possible:

I did get into that – actually, ultimately, unproductive – frame of mind that I needed to collect followers, and so I started, and that was my-- Part of my goal for using Twitter at that stage was to collect followers, which is completely counterproductive and daft, and really didn't do anything for me at all. But I did do it, and there was a great feeling of satisfaction when I reached a thousand followers on Twitter. (Henry)

Henry had met some casual friends through his initial Twitter account, which was a mix of professional and personal, but it wasn't until he started to record podcasts relating to one of his interests and created an account which was linked to the podcasts that he made friends who he described as being “remarkably close”.

I feel there are two or three people that I've met through Twitter and through the podcasts – principally through Twitter and then they've listened to the podcast – that I feel closer to, in terms of friendship, than quite a few of the people I know in real life. And I've never met them. (Henry)

LiveJournal, like Twitter, seems to encourage connections with people who are not known in person; although it is essentially a blogging site, LiveJournal communities enable users to socialise with and to make friends with people who have common interests. The three interviewees who were very active LiveJournal users – Christine, Lydia and Veronica – had all joined the site in order to participate in fandom. Although Lydia stated that she had since moved away from most fandom interactions, LiveJournal remained her primary online social network, on which she had “actual friends”.

Christine had become interested in a fandom, and through that fandom had discovered LiveJournal,

and that then led me into the community on LiveJournal related to that fandom, and I just got talking to those people. And they seemed really nice and interesting characters. (Christine)

She did not, however, count them as friends until she had met them in person at a group meeting a few months later.

6.6.1.1 Seeking out strangers

Two interviewees had deliberately sought to meet new people and make new friends online. Francis met a number of people via forums and communication tools such as Yahoo Messenger: having had regular contact and shared information with them, the friendships developed and deepened and he has since met them in person.

Enfys joined a site specifically to look for friendship, at a time when she was feeling particularly isolated due to her personal circumstances, and connected with someone who has since become a very close friend.

We sort of connected, because of-- My online name was [in Welsh] and she was interested because of that, so initially that's how we sort of got chatting to each other. And we just decided, one Easter holiday, that we'd meet up, and we met up and went for a walk. And it was just lovely

– we both clicked immediately, and I felt like I’d known her for ever and it was all really relaxed and lovely, and it’s just gone on from that. (Enfys)

6.6.1.2 Friending Friends of friends

Despite the overall lack of interest in Friending strangers on Facebook, several of the interviewees who were active Facebook users had Friended someone whom they had not met, but who had been introduced to them by a mutual friend. Getting to know people via mutual friends has long been a way of making new friends and acquaintances; the visibility of users’ lists of contacts, and of their interactions, has made connecting with a friend of a friend (FOAF) significantly easier within OSNs. This was discussed separately to the practice of interacting with FOAFs, since it involves taking the extra step of allowing someone unknown to have access to any status updates, photographs and comment threads which are not limited to a specific group of Friends.

So there’s a *small* number of friends I’ve got whom I’ve never met – tend to be friends of friends, where the recommendation comes from the mutual friend, that this is somebody we’d get on with well. (Arthur)

I think [I’ve Friended] maybe one or two where it was a friend of [wife], and then I spoke to [her] first, before – to actually find out who on earth they were, rather than just accepting them. (Carl)

Even though these FOAFs have been identified as a Friend within the context of Facebook, they may not be considered to properly fall within the category of ‘friend’ unless the interviewee has the opportunity to get to know them significantly better, for example through extended conversation or by meeting them in person.

A friend in Canada, who we met online but have met in real life, she said, “You should really become Friends with this friend of mine – another photographer, who’s...” So I did, and she seems nice, but, you know, we haven’t-- I wouldn’t say that we’re actually friends. We haven’t talked to each other... So none of that’s really developed into anything real. (Grace)

Hermione, who had expressed reservations with regard to making good friends online, had made what she described as a “casual friend” as a result of being introduced on Facebook by a mutual friend. They had met in person, which Hermione felt added an extra dimension to their relationship:

I think the friendship would have carried on, but I don't think it would have developed-- I don't think I would have gone beyond the "Oh, hello, I'm from the local area", "So am I" – I think it would have stayed at that. (Hermione)

6.6.1.3 Almost a stranger

Interestingly, some interviewees who were reluctant to Friend someone on Facebook whom they had not met in person, or even an unmet friend of a friend, had Friendened people whom they had met only very briefly, and barely knew. Daisy, who said that she had not made new friends on Facebook, but that her Facebook Friends were "not always people I know", described three separate categories of people who were part of her Friend List: people in her current social circle,

people that I knew ages and ages ago, and we had our high school reunion and everybody in my graduating class got on Facebook and kept in touch, and then there's-- every year, sort of in Fresher's Week, when you start meeting loads of people, and then you say, "Oh, I'll Friend you on Facebook!" and you go home and do it and then you never talk to them again. (Daisy)

Ursula, who was very sociable and said that she "love[d] networking" and was "big on connections", was also happy to add people met briefly and casually to her Facebook Friend List:

So it's got [...] people I happen to have met. If I go to a friend's hen party, and you go "Ooh, hello!", you know, get rabbiting to people – just like we've met today – and you go, "Oh, are you on Facebook? I'll add you!" Just to get your numbers up, you know. So it's a snowball thing, that's loads of different people. (Ursula)

This seems to contradict the overwhelming perception of Facebook as an online social network within which the majority of those who have access to a user's status updates are people who are everyday, face-to-face friends or with whom the user has friends or significant interests in common.

6.6.1.4 Ending a Friending

With the ability to add people to a Friend or Followers List with the click of a button comes the ability to remove them. Most OSNs do not notify users when they have been removed from someone's list; nonetheless, several interviewees

mentioned being uncomfortable with the concept of ‘unFriending’ or ‘unfollowing’ people, even very casual acquaintances. There was a sense that it is impolite to do so. Bella mentioned something which had happened on her Facebook, when someone whom she only knew vaguely had commented on one of her posts in a way that was, if not offensive, then not in keeping with Bella’s and the majority of her Friends’ opinions:

And I thought, how is this taking place on my Wall? Not that I thought anyone would hold me responsible for it, but I was really taken aback. [...] I think probably he’s only my Facebook Friend because I might come across him socially and I don’t want to be rude. (Bella)

Arthur spoke of having had a Friend request from a stranger, someone with whom he had a friend in common, in order to allow the stranger to comment on a post Arthur had made: having spoken to the mutual friend he did not feel comfortable doing so, for various reasons. When asked whether he had considered Friending the stranger briefly, so that he could make his comments, and then unFriending him, he said that he had not.

For me, the process of unFriending somebody is-- It’s a positive negative action. In a way that declining a Friend request is less so. [...] Think of these two sentences: ‘You’re not my friend’, and ‘You’re not my friend any more’. The second has a certain ‘therefore you have been downgraded in status’. (Arthur)

6.6.2 Meeting on common ground

When the interviewees were asked how they would define a friend, or what expectations they had of friendship, whether online or offline, the importance of having shared interests was something which was mentioned frequently. As noted above, the development of situational friendships is common online, whether as a result of sharing hobbies or professional interests. In some cases, these friendships can continue on at the same level for months or years, never developing or deepening significantly; in others, they become particularly important to those involved, sometimes superseding their offline, face-to-face friendships.

In many cases, the initial connection through having something in common may not lead to even a shallow level of interaction between individuals; this is particularly true

in online communities, where lurking is a regular, and usually accepted, practice¹⁴. Sometimes, however, mutual disclosure between individuals leads to more knowledge and understanding of each other, and to an increase in intimacy.

People become an acquaintance because they've got something in common, then they perhaps become a friend because they've got multiple things in common. (Declan)

As mentioned in Section 6.5.4, online interactions are often used to fill a gap or meet a need for an individual, whether it is the opportunity to communicate with other fans (Christine), to find support and advice for a disabled child (Faye), or to contact other breeders of rare chickens (Isla).

And I suppose I see the friends I've made through the podcast as sharing a passion of mine, and that makes it a different relationship, because I've never been passionate about [my work] in the same way as I feel passionate about music. (Henry)

6.6.2.1 Finding friends in fandom

Fandom, almost by definition (the word 'fan' comes from 'fanatic') is filled with people who are passionate about something; who watch, read, listen, draw or write as part of that passion. Before the Internet and the World Wide Web made it easy to find and communicate with fellow fans, clubs and communities were maintained by post, group meet-ups and occasional fan conventions. Fandoms exist for television shows, films, books, video games and bands, among other things. The ease of using the Internet for finding other people online who share the same passion is not, of course, limited to fandom, but the historic sense of otherness which many fans have experienced has meant that the development of the ability to participate anonymously or pseudonymously was a tremendous advantage.

This passion was reflected in Christine's experience: having joined a community of fans online, she felt that she had found something "absolutely wonderful".

But what really, I think, is at the essence of it, why I was so keen to go and meet people and to make friends, and friends of friends, through LiveJournal, is – I think it's the bonding that comes from the fandom. It's a very intense experience. Well, not intense, but also you know that

¹⁴ Lurking is the term used to describe the practice of being a member of an online group without actively participating.

really, profoundly, there's some connection with these people. You might be very diverse in your lifestyle, interests and where you live and all sorts of things, but you share a bond in this thing, which is-- it says something about your psyche, I think. And therefore we know what-- we have this common bond, on quite a profound level. Maybe it's something we can talk about with each other that we can't talk about with other people, as well. So that's a bond, isn't it? (Christine)

Daisy commented on the way in which having one shared interest encourages the discovery of other commonalities: she noted that people who are introverted, or who have health or psychological problems which make meeting people difficult, find it easier to “reach out” to others in somewhere like a fan community.

I think it's just a more comfortable way to do it, sometimes. [...] The venues, at least, that I meet people online through, because they're mostly fandom, you know already that there's something that you have in common to talk about, and so you've got that starting point. (Daisy)

Daisy had met a friend in a fan-based MOO (Multi-user dungeon, Object Oriented – a virtual reality used for gaming) in 1997, decided after a few months to go and stay with her for a weekend, and is still friends with her now.

6.6.2.2 Professional connections

The majority of the professional relationships which interviewees had created online had been via specific forums or Twitter. No-one reported making a close professional contact on Facebook. Since so few people were active users of LinkedIn, it was not surprising that no new professional connections had been made on that site.

Andrew belonged to several web-based forums which related to his work. He worked in “quite a small profession, UK-wide”, but one which seems to have a strong community – perhaps surprisingly, since many of them are pitching for the same work. He had made some close professional contacts, as well as what he called “a friend with a capital F”:

It started off, we just met via the forums and chatted along with everybody else, and then I was going to be down in that neck of the woods, and she said, “You must come down and stay with us.” So I popped in, we spent a weekend down there with her and her husband.

So, yes, [Ann]'s become what I would regard as a circle of friends. She's not a close friend, in the way that people I've been friends with for years and years are, but yeah, I would count her as definitely a friend with a capital F, yes. (Andrew)

Isla had met two people through a forum for poultry breeders, both of whom she had met and would describe as friends. They have an interest in rare breed chickens, and their conversations have moved outwards to more varied shared interests. Although she felt that their relationships, and one in particular, had developed as a result of meeting in person, she considered them to be professional friends, at the level of "casual acquaintances".

Although relatively few interviewees described themselves as active users of Twitter, almost all of those who were had made professional contacts or friendships through the site. It is possible that, despite the 140-character limit of Twitter messages, the mix which most people seem to maintain of professional and personal followers and tweets facilitates a sense of connection.

Kendra had a mix of professional and personal contacts on her Twitter feed, although she deliberately kept her own personal tweets to a minimum, since it is an open forum. The type of professional connection which she had made on Twitter was described as "professional friendship":

friends in the sense that I will talk to them, I might do a bit of socialising, I might do a bit of letting 'me' out in my online interactions with them. (Kendra)

Having created that level of friendship with a fellow professional, she then met him in person

and I introduced myself as my Twitter alt! Which is quite-- you know. But then we started having-- Because we had been having a dialogue before he had come, about various things, and then we carried on the conversation. So that-- It's a slightly different level of friendship again. (Kendra)

Kendra had made several of these professional friendships on Twitter, exchanging information and having discussions with people; however, they remained at the level of "professional friend" even when she had met them in person.

So that's a level of friendship. As you say, it's a professional one, but not just a nod the head as you walk past them in the corridor.

SKM: No, an actual stop and chat.

Kendra: Yeah, and do a bit of sharing, a bit of social stuff, and a bit of personal stuff.

6.6.3 Gaming

Online gaming was mentioned by eight interviewees, half of whom were active players of Facebook games while the other half played World of Warcraft¹⁵ and other MMOs (Massively Multiplayer Online games). Although World of Warcraft (WOW) and similar virtual worlds do not usually specifically require players to join as a group or to know other players, having a ready-made group can enhance the experience and facilitate advancement through the game. On Facebook, having Friends who also play the game is often necessary in order to progress, for example by unlocking the next level.

The majority of Kenton's online socialising took place within the context of MMOs: he had begun to play when he worked abroad and spent his evenings playing online with some of his colleagues, which had ultimately improved their working relationships by creating a bond between them. Later on, in a different workplace, his boss had invited him to join a group playing a different game online:

So I got into that, and then I met his best friend and his brother-in-law, and a couple of other people, and, actually, his wife used to play with him. And then meet them online, on Monday night, 7 or 8 o'clock, as soon as you can get on. And we were on 'til sometimes quite late at night. And that's the group – core group – I've stayed with now, for six years. (Kenton)

As a result of this, Kenton had met new friends and introduced some of his own, offline friends to the gaming group. The time that they spent playing was also spent chatting and joking with each other, and they had regular meet-ups and days out with their families. For Kenton, the social interaction with the group was more important than the game itself.

¹⁵ World of Warcraft is an extremely popular MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game), within which players create an avatar and take part in quests and combat against other players.

6.6.3.1 A friend to play with

Facebook hosts thousands of games from a number of providers, ranging from solitaire to Scrabble, to action and role-playing games. While many games are single-player and only require contact with other players in order to send or receive items, some games, such as Scrabble, must be played against another player. Bella and Declan had both Friended people they did not know, but who were friends of friends, in order to play Scrabble against them.

She was looking for Scrabble opponents, so I said, “All right, I’ll play you at Scrabble” and I chat fairly often with her online now. I’ve known her for about four years, but we’ve never actually met. (Declan)

Declan said that he now talks to his Scrabble partner about a variety of subjects and that he would classify her as a friend, although he felt that since they had not yet managed to meet in person, she was “probably more of an acquaintance than a friend”.

Evelyn and Edwin had both played a variety of games on Facebook. As mentioned above, to advance in some games it is necessary to have Friends who also play, so that they can send gifts or extra lives, and unlock levels. For some games, it is only necessary to have three or four Friends who play, but for others the more “Game Friends” (von Coelln, 2009) a user has, the faster they can progress through the game. Both Evelyn and Edwin had Friended complete strangers in order to progress in these games, though neither of them reported Friending strangers in general.

SKM: So have you ever Friended somebody who you actually don’t know – apart from for the game?

Evelyn: No. I think that’s a bit weird. Although people have done that to me.

In addition to providing assistance and added value to his gaming experience, Edwin also felt that his ‘game friends’ were a source of general low-level support to him, in the sense that he would go online if he needed cheering up:

Just simply because you-- all it takes to join your group of friends is the press of a button. There’s a huge number of people who are like-minded, and who play a particular game. You can go onto the forums or go onto the online chat and there will be a number of people on there talking about something that you enjoy doing. And yeah, if you want an immediate fix, it’s there. (Edwin)

One advantage of Facebook's Friending system is that if someone is removed from a user's Friend List they are not notified, and so it is a risk-free action. Thus, if someone was added as a 'game friend' they could easily be removed from the list with no need for explanations. This may explain why users are happy to Friend strangers for gaming purposes, where they would not do so for any other reason.

6.6.3.2 Socialising as a character

A peculiar characteristic of gaming in virtual worlds such as World of Warcraft is that of socialising in character. Socialising in character, or role-playing, within World of Warcraft tends to take place on specific RP (role-playing) servers rather than within the general servers (WoWWiki, 2012). Kendra and Peggy both socialised in character in WOW, although neither of them mentioned using RP servers specifically. Both of them played as more than one character, each of which had different personalities:

and actually, if I'm in a grumpy mood, or an anti-social mood, I have certain characters that I play in that way. My amount of socialising depends on which character I'm playing. Because they all have different personas and I play them in different ways, and socialise in different ways... (Kendra)

Kendra and Peggy were also similar in that they played the game with offline, everyday friends, but had no interest in becoming friends with the strangers they gamed with. Peggy was a fairly light Internet user who did a limited amount of socialising online and was sceptical about the idea of making friends online. She had given no information out about herself to her WOW guild and said that she was sure that they thought that she was "a fourteen-year-old spotty boy that wouldn't say boo to a goose". She did not consider the people that she played with, other than those she already knew offline, to be friends or even acquaintances of Peggy herself:

So they're not friends – they're friends of that character. They're not *my* friends. I wouldn't know who they are. They could be sitting in this room, for God's sake – I haven't got a clue! So they are friends of *that*... (Peggy)

Within the context of the game, however, the friendships which are made and maintained as or by the character are important. The elements or qualities of the

in-game friendships are the same as those found in ‘traditional’, everyday friendships, such as support, advice, exchange of information and shared experiences.

Kenton, despite his high level of participation in online gaming, did not socialise in character, although he admitted that he did play his different characters differently.

I’m not one for fully immersing and whenever I talk to anybody, that’s my persona. (Kenton)

The core group with whom Kenton played were predominantly people he knew offline, and whom he saw on a regular, sometimes daily, basis. Since his primary motivation for gaming was to socialise with them, while also taking part in quests and challenges within the game, socialising in-character would in fact take away from his enjoyment. Kenton’s interaction with his gaming group took place via voice chat, while both Peggy and Kendra interacted via text-based chat. Chatting via voice rather than text can make it more difficult to maintain character, although it also has advantages such as speed of communication when the group is undertaking fast-moving battles or raids.

6.6.4 Group friendships

A number of respondents to the online questionnaire had mentioned the formation of group friendships within online communities, and these were also reported by interviewees. Christine had had a group meet-up with people she had met in a fan community, and as a result had cemented friendships with them as a group. While there was, as is often the case, one individual who tended to do the organising, “the same people always tag along” to group get-togethers. These have included holidays together, visits to each other’s houses, and a regular Christmas-time meet-up.

Brian had formed a small group of three with people he had met on Flickr, in order to encourage less experienced photographers who were sharing their pictures.

We wanted to comment on other people’s photos as they posted them. Because lots of people got comments, but they tended to be good photographers, or well known, and we wanted to do something positive for people who were just posting stuff. (Brian)

The group friendship was close for a while; although they never met in person, they exchanged gifts by post and communicated frequently. However, after Brian ceased to be active on Flickr, the friendship waned. Brian described it as being similar to his friendships from university – once the original context of the friendship had gone, the friendship was no longer maintained.

Faye had met a group of friends on a large-scale forum for new mothers, from which they subsequently migrated.

On ProBoards, you can set up a free forum. We set up our own one on there. And then the girls that I met on the forum, we speak to there, we speak to on Facebook, we've got a Facebook group... we speak in a lot of different places – and email, MSN... It's always the same group of girls. (Faye)

The group had had a few meet-ups, and Faye had invited several of them to her wedding, which was taking place a few months after the interview. For a young woman like Faye, a community such as this is very important: as the mother of a disabled child she sometimes felt trapped in her house and in her role, and she derived a great deal of benefit from the social interaction and the support she received.

I should say there's about 25 or 30 regular members. We have a morning post every morning – you know, "Are you all right? What are you doing today? What have your kids been like overnight?" And every morning I'd say about 15 people post to say what they're up to that day. [...] It is nice. Like I said, we all talk more than we do with our real life friends. Because I know what people are doing every day. (Faye)

6.6.5 Development and migration of online friendships

Although a number of interviewees mentioned the importance of meeting an online friend in person in order to enhance or cement the friendship, some of them talked about experiences of online friendships developing and increasing within the online environment.

Faye met her best friend via the mothers' forum to which they both belonged. They became very close, keeping in contact every day, and – before they had met face-to-face – setting up a business together. They shared bank details, signed contracts and started the business, all before meeting in person. Faye felt that the reason she was able to make that commitment was that they had built up a high level of trust between them:

I think the fact that we knew each other only online, and we spoke to each other every single day, and she told me things that she didn't tell anyone else. I thought, The amount of trust she's showing me, and she's never even met me. And then I gave that back, and it just-- It was a natural thing, it just went on and on, and we started trusting each other more, and then it developed into the business. And to be honest, I didn't even give it a second thought when we set up that business together. (Faye)

They have since met in person on a number of occasions, but the majority of their interaction still takes place online.

In many cases, the development of the friendship took place in an online environment other than that in which they met, as the dyad or group migrated from one OSN to another.

Bella had not met any of her online friends at the time of her interview, although she had stated in her online questionnaire that she wanted to. She had originally made a number of online friends via a band's fan site, which she was very involved in for several years but which ended in approximately 2005. When she joined Facebook a year or two later, she re-found some fellow fans from the site, and has Friended some of them:

yes, we've become a group on Facebook, really. Not in any formal way, but there's a crowd of us that ... interact. (Bella)

One in particular has developed into a strong, close friendship, involving private discussions and the exchange of gifts.

Arthur met fellow football fans via an email list and subsequently at an away match, meeting in the flesh for the first time a number of people who I'd known in cyberspace for months or years (Arthur);

he had since Friended a few of them on Facebook and consequently discovered other common interests. He had not met them since, and felt that he was unlikely to meet them in person again very often, if at all.

Evelyn had met three people via a Facebook game whom she had stayed close to; two of them remained as Facebook Friends, while the relationship with the other had migrated onto email,

which I think is at a personal level. So we exchange emails, and photographs and pictures, and stuff that isn't on Facebook. So it's sort of-- It's moved on, and it's not... another level. It's a subsequent level, I suppose, if you like, because Facebook was the beginning, and then it's progressed to email. (Evelyn)

Grace's group of friends also migrated their interaction to email; they would send joint emails, with a new topic every day. Although the emails have now "fizzled out", they are all still in contact on Facebook: there is no communication via the original SNS any more.

Christine and her group of friends, who met on LiveJournal, still socialise there, but they occasionally move their group conversation away from the original forum, onto email, in order to have a more "private chat". Christine acknowledged that the closeness of the group, brought about by those private conversations and their face-to-face meetings, could have an effect on the rest of the community:

I think that then gave rise to – I suppose clique's actually not a bad word – the sense that there's a group of us who know each other and can interact personally, because we all live in England, or we can physically get together without too much hassle. And so you then naturally tend to interact more with those people. And there's almost a sense of loyalty, I suppose. (Christine)

There is always a danger, when a dyad or group friendship is created within an online community, that references made to them within the larger group can lead to feelings of exclusion among the rest of the members (Baym, 2000, p. 135). However, the value found in online friendships, whether one-to-one or within a group, is often too high for those involved to allow consideration of the community as a whole to alter their behaviour.

6.7 The Impact of Online Social Networking on Friendship

A number of interviewees discussed the impact, both positive and negative, that the development of social networking sites had had upon friendship generally. Evelyn said that

she felt that it was more difficult to make friends now than it used to be because people are more guarded, and she believed that

things like social networking have killed the art of conversation. For example, [my fiancé] and I were at a restaurant [...] and on the next table, there was a couple there, both of them on their phones, looking at Facebook. And we said, “Wow, look at that. They’re not really talking to each other any more.” (Evelyn)

Evelyn’s comment not only illustrates an apparent shift in society which makes using a mobile phone in a restaurant accepted, if not acceptable, behaviour, but also the ‘always-on’ culture which has developed thanks to the increased use of smartphones and the widespread availability of wifi and mobile Internet connections.

Kenton agreed with Evelyn that “things like social media, mobile phones, stresses of work life” made it more difficult to make friends in everyday life, and that people checking their phones at social gatherings had become ubiquitous. He acknowledged that he did the same thing:

I do it, but the only reason I do it is work. Because I have responsibility and I work with America, who are still working. (Kenton)

Peggy felt that the pervasiveness of Facebook and other social media had changed the way that people connect, even in person.

You go out, you meet someone – “What’s your mobile? What’s your Twitter? Oh, I found you on Facebook!” (Peggy)

She pointed out that, while it makes it easier to contact and to keep in touch with someone, you don’t necessarily always want to be found. (Peggy)

Peggy also noted that another change which the increase in use of OSNs had brought about was in the maintenance of existing friendships; sending messages via Facebook had, for some of her friends, replaced telephone calls or even text messages as a means of keeping in touch. This development is discussed further in Section 7.6.7.

Francis felt that Facebook had changed the way that he made friends in two ways: the software can inform him of individuals with whom he has Facebook Friends in common, and can thus ‘introduce’ him to people who may have similar hobbies or interests; it also meant that he did not need to be directly linked with people in order to have some contact with them.

I don't need to be Friends with X to see what they wrote – I just need to be Friends with Y to see what X wrote about Y. (Francis)

Ursula also enjoyed the fact that Facebook enabled her to make connections and to network easily, but allowed her to be aware of individuals without having to Friend them. She also believed that the widespread use of social networking by celebrities and other famous people has led to an increased sense of equality.

I do think it's levelled the playing field, and there isn't-- Well, not the class system, but the hierarchical, "Oh, I can't talk to him, he's the MD of that business", or-- It is much more, everybody's just a person. And I know people look up to people who are celebrities, but they still are not scared to talk to them. [...] And I do honestly believe it's easier to make friends face-to-face now because of-- I don't think that's stopping it. (Ursula)

Ursula's comment above has some echoes of the long-standing view that the anonymity found online leads to a flattening of the everyday social hierarchies which exist offline. In July 1993, Peter Steiner published a cartoon in the New Yorker showing two dogs, one sitting in a chair in front of a computer while the other sits on the floor: the dog in the chair is saying, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog". While Steiner did not deliberately "tap into the zeitgeist" when he drew the cartoon (Fleishman, 2000), it has been quoted and reproduced innumerable times as an illustration of the sense of privacy and security which many people feel when they interact anonymously on the Internet. It has also served as shorthand for the ambiguity of the Internet; anyone can pretend to be anything online. While most of the interviewees recognised this as a reason to exercise caution, several of them stated that they liked the fact that the Internet brought them together with people they would not otherwise have come into contact with.

Backgrounds don't bother me. [...] Differences in backgrounds-- I'm well educated, university degree, all the rest of it. My commentary tends to be from an educated standpoint. But it doesn't mean that there aren't-- There are definitely people who haven't gone through formal education, and come online and-- You know, all around the world – Australia, the States, Europe, Japan, etc – I've known people and had good chats with them online, all round the world. And it's not always well-educated people. So it just depends on, really, their attitude to what being online is like... (Edwin)

6.8 Summary

Chen et al. used the term “digital dividend” to describe a sense of community online (2002, p. 26). It could equally be argued that the creation of online dyadic or group friendships is a digital dividend, and specific benefits which have been derived by participants in this research are discussed further in Chapter Seven.

This chapter has briefly explored interviewees’ Internet use with particular focus on their behaviour within online social networks, and has discussed their opinions and experience of the creation of friendship online. There is evidence of a variation in behaviour, and attitudes towards others’ behaviour, between different social networking sites.

Friends are made online in much the same way as they are made offline: professional connections which expand into more social relationships; introductions by mutual friends; common hobbies and interests; and by joining the online equivalent of a social club or an introduction service. The growing use of smartphones and tablets, and the increasing availability of wireless Internet connections in public spaces has meant that online social networking has not only facilitated virtual connections but has also had an impact on everyday, offline interactions.

It is clear that the norms which have become established in society over hundreds of years have been translated into online environments, often without any significant changes: there is still the expectation of privacy in what is considered a bounded space, a sense of caution when interacting with strangers, and a desire not to be, or be seen to be, rude.

Chapter Seven

On-Off Friendships: Online Relationships as Part of Offline Life

This chapter focuses on themes which relate to the remaining two research objectives. It investigates how online friendships are evaluated by those involved and how they compare to offline friendships. It also discusses interviewees' experiences of the integration of online friends into their everyday lives and the ways in which the Internet has changed and enhanced offline friendships.

Of the 36 interviewees, 27 stated that they had made a friend online, although the levels of friendship varied, from professional friendships which stayed fairly distant but with a cordial relationship, to very close friends who were described as extremely important to the interviewee. The importance of an online friendship did not always lie in the relationship itself, but in what it stood for for those involved: for some, it met a need which could not be met offline, as discussed in Chapter Six; for others, the value lay in being able to have a space or relationship online which was entirely their own, unrelated to their everyday lives.

When the interview participants were asked how they defined friendship, the definitions of online friendships were no different to those of offline, 'traditional' friendships: for example, giving and receiving support, being able to "be yourself" (Enfys), having common interests, mutual self-disclosure and having trust in each other.

7.1 The value of online friendships

Friendships which had been created online were reported by interviewees as being equally as important to them as those made offline, in a more 'traditional' way. For some, their online friendships were the most important friendships in their lives, and had brought them levels of caring and support which they had not experienced in their face-to-face relationships.

The idea of online communities and online friendship as something precious and, if not secret, then certainly private, was mentioned by several respondents. Grace, in particular,

felt that the time she spent online was particularly important because it was entirely separate from her everyday offline identities as wife, mother and churchgoer.

Grace: You've got to have some private space. But, for me, that private space was developing friendships with other people that were just *my* friends. So they didn't see the persona that I have to have at church, or the persona that you have at the school gates, or the persona of a wife. They could just see what I wanted to present myself like.

SKM: The you that you want to be. Or the you that you want to show.

Grace: The you that you really are, underneath all of those things.

I think that was the thing, with those friendships, was it was being *me* again. And I kind of had forgotten about that, with being a wife, and so busy at church and everything. I just didn't have that being *me* that I'd had at university. (Grace)

Faye, who had met her best friend and business partner online, nonetheless felt the need to have an online space where her friend was not present and had actively discouraged her from joining a forum on which Faye was active. Her reasoning was partly to protect her friend from added worry, since the forum was a place in which she could talk freely about her disabled child

and I don't really like [Jen] knowing that I'm having a bad day and that I'm stressed, because then she'll take it upon herself to look after me, and she's got enough to worry about. (Faye)

Despite their extremely close friendship, Faye felt that being part of an online community which she did not share with [Jen] was important.

Love her to death, but ... it's nice to have somewhere without her. (Faye)

The importance of online friendships as evidenced within the questionnaire responses was discussed in Section 5.15.8 above. Many of the same themes arose in the interviews, illustrating the many ways in which online friends can enrich and improve the lives of those involved, both on and offline.

7.1.1 Important relationships

Both Bella and Veronica mentioned that their online friendships were particularly important to them because of limitations they had as a result of health issues. Bella was not always able to meet her local friends in person:

I'm not in good health, and I'm disabled [...], and therefore it's difficult for me always to get to see people (Bella)

and so her online interactions were particularly important to her.

Veronica had ME (chronic fatigue syndrome) and although at the time of the interview she described herself as “relatively well”,

there have been times when I have been very limited in what I could go out and do. So going out socialising, I’m quite limited, honestly.

My LJ Friends list *is* my social circle, on a day-to-day basis, very much. [...] I feel lucky, really, that my friends are online. (Veronica)

Lydia said that her experience of meeting up with online friends in person had helped her to overcome her shyness. She had first met an online friend, with whom she had a very close relationship, after about three years of talking online, and had initially felt “very awkward” and nervous.

But as time’s gone on, and as I’ve done it more often, I’ve got much better at dealing with that kind of nervousness, and in fact I would probably say that meeting Internet friends has helped – not cure me, but certainly break down some of that shyness. I’m a lot less shy about meeting people in person than I used to be. (Lydia)

For some interviewees, their online friends were especially important because they had relatively few offline friends. The stereotypical image of the heavy Internet user with poor social skills and a long list of online friends is exactly that: a stereotype. However, for those people without the time, the opportunity or the inclination to seek out potential friends in their everyday lives, the Internet provides an opportunity to meet their social needs. Christine lived in a rural area and worked from home, and had felt isolated and lonely before meeting her group of friends on LiveJournal.

I don’t really have many friends, to be honest. This is why I love my LiveJournal friends so much. (Christine)

Grace said that most of the people she socialised with were people with whom she had quite casual things in common, such as church membership or children of a similar age, but were not people she felt particularly connected to:

They’re not as close friends as some people I’ve never met, but have shared personal things with. (Grace)

Several interviewees who described themselves as having very few or no offline friends were almost apologetic when they talked about it, describing their lack of everyday local friends or their close relationships with people they had never met in a negative way.

I'm one of those sad Internet people who has no social life outside the Internet.
(Lydia)

However, this attitude was often only briefly evident, and may have been an automatically defensive response; all of the interviewees who had made friends online had had positive experiences and ultimately spoke enthusiastically about those relationships.

Grace spoke movingly about her decision to reduce the amount of interaction she had with her online friends, made partly because she had become a mother and felt that she had to “be in [her] real life, more”. She felt that, after having formed close friendships with people around the world, being just in that “real life” and being limited geographically would not be enough.

Because it's really hard to imagine now, with the Internet as it is, anybody being contained to their geographic space. And so, I felt like I was going to have to shrink my world back down – that I had gained all these insights into different places in the world through all these people, and different ways of life, and that I was going to shrink it back down again, and it would be rubbish.
[...]

So I feel like online friendships really expand your world. (Grace)

7.1.2 Giving and receiving support online

Online communities abound with visible shows of support: clicking the ‘Like’ button on a Facebook post, retweeting or favouriting a Twitter message, sending another user a virtual hug (often shown as ((hug)) or *hug*), or simply by replying to a post or comment.

Certainly, if one of my friends posted and no-one else had commented, I would feel it would be a good thing to comment, so that they didn't feel that they were speaking into the void! (Christine)

The levels of support given and received by the interview participants from their online friends echoed those which they expected from anyone they were close to. When interviewees were asked to define what it meant to be a friend, support was the characteristic which was mentioned most often, by a considerable margin.

7.1.2.1 Advice and emotional support

Providing emotional support is an important element of friendship, and links strongly to the concepts of trust, sharing and self-disclosure. Offering and

asking for support in an online environment is often done ‘off-screen’, by private message or email, but it is also often an integral part of the development of deeper friendship.

Edwin was happy for his online ‘game friends’ to remain online and at a distance, and felt no desire to move them offline, but he saw them as casually supportive, in that he would use them as a means to cheer himself up, rather than as people he would discuss personal problems with. Equally, he was happy to offer sympathy and advice or support about any problems which they chose to share online.

Minerva provided support for her online friend’s mental health issues. Their relationship had moved almost exclusively to the telephone, and there had been times when her friend relied on Minerva to tell her if she was ill:

she got into the habit of ringing me up at times and saying, “Do I sound as if I’m okay to you?”

I mean, I’ve spoken to her psychiatrist, I’ve spoken to the crisis team, I’ve spoken to her doctor, I’ve spoken to her sons, obviously. You know, in trying to get her help. (Minerva)

Other interviewees, for example Kendra and Evelyn, reported providing emotional support to their online friends at particularly difficult times such as bereavement and relationship break-downs. Lydia had received “brilliant” levels of support from her online friends when her mother was diagnosed with a serious illness several years ago.

7.1.2.2 Professional or practical support

Some interviewees reported receiving more practical help and support from their online friends. Faye belonged to several communities and forums, including one for parents of disabled children, where she both gave and received support. She had met someone from one of the forums in person, with whom she got on very well, and who also turned out to be of practical value:

Because she works in services for disabled people, and we had an application [...] that we sent down [...] She fast-tracked it through – nice having friends in high places! (Faye)

Lydia spent a lot of her free time writing original fiction, and some of her online friends were her test audience, reading early drafts of her work and offering criticism. Henry's music podcasts led to the development of several very good friendships with fellow fans, but also to an offer which, although not something which Henry had sought, would add value to the service he was providing.

I've done a kind of in-depth review of every album that the group has done. When I got towards the end of that, completely out of the blue, one of the people that I'd met through the podcast offered to do a transcript of all those episodes and release it as an ebook. He didn't even want to have his name on it, but it's just something that he wanted to do for me, because I'd done the podcast for him. And so that's the kind of thing that I would class as friendship. (Henry)

7.1.2.3 Financial support

For some of the interviewees, giving financial support to a friend, other than a very long-standing, very good friend, was a line that they would not cross. However, there were examples of participants both giving and receiving financial support online.

Brian had been part of a group of friends who had migrated from Flickr to Facebook, and the daughter of one of the group members had been diagnosed with cancer. Several of the group members were professional photographers:

And so we all got involved with raising money for her by selling-- donating some of our photos that could be sold online. People did prints and so on. (Brian)

Lydia had been the recipient of more direct financial donations from her online friends, when she had had a crisis. She described it as

the kindness of strangers who are friends. Because they-- We've never met, but they are definitely friends – but on some level they are still strangers, because we've never met. (Lydia)

7.1.3 Close friendships

Several interviewees spoke of particularly close friendships which they had developed online; in some cases they had met the friend in person, but in others they had not. Henry described himself as having “some kind of special bond” with a friend he had made through his music podcasting. They had never met in person, although they had both appeared on each other's podcasts:

And the interaction that we have, in 140 characters, is remarkable. I don't think I've even ever emailed him. It's only been through Twitter and talking to him to record the podcast. And I really do feel closer to him than an awful lot of people. [...] So we have a really remarkably close relationship, and that seems to have-- We seem to be able to sustain that. (Henry)

Henry said that he did not have many friends, generally, and so

it really has been the relationships that I've built up [online] which have been sustaining. (Henry)

Andrew spoke of clients he had worked for for over twenty years and who he had never met, but whom he considered to be

quite close friends, because we chat one way or the other, and we know each other really quite well (Andrew)

and because their conversations regularly moved beyond professional topics.

A sense of deep connection with online friends was mentioned by some interviewees, although it was not always long-lasting or reciprocated by the other party. Brian tended to leave people behind as he moved through life; he had not maintained many friendships from his past. He described himself as having a wide social circle, but he felt that he tended to have "moments of friendship" in which he connected with someone. His small group of friends on Flickr had been very close for a year or two, but when he had moved away from Flickr the regular group interaction had not continued.

Grace believed that a deep connection was necessary to be a truly close friend, though she spoke of a specific dyadic friendship which she felt was unequal in terms of that connection.

I don't know that he would say that I'm his best friend, or one of his best friends. But for me, he's one of my closest friends. (Grace)

A sense of equality is often mentioned in the literature (Mendelson & Kay, 2003; Pahl, 2000) as a defining characteristic of close friendship. It was specifically mentioned by seven of the interviewees, but interestingly, while the women all spoke of the importance of equality within friendship, the men said that it didn't matter to them.

I think a friendship needs to have a great deal of equality in it, to really work. (Isla)

And that's okay too, because that's the way it has to work. It's not a bilateral agreement. It's not always both ways. (Torsten)

7.1.3.1 Best friends

Daisy's long-standing friendship with a friend met in a MOO, mentioned in Section 6.6.2.1, had become slightly less close in the last few years due to a change in her friend's political opinions, but she described a couple she had met online, with whom she had lived for three years, as her best friends.

I met [them] online and they really needed to get out of the situation they were in at the time that my roommate was moving away, so they moved in with me. We'd met once. But we'd been talking for quite a long time. And they're **really** part of the family now. They're still looking after my cats. (Daisy)

Trust is another significant element of friendship, mentioned by half of the interviewees when they discussed what friendship meant to them. The depth of Faye's trust in and friendship with [Jen] was evidenced by the fact that they started a business together before they had met. Their first face-to-face meeting, after two years of online interaction, had also demonstrated a high level of trust: Faye and her family travelled to stay with [Jen] and her family. They had booked a hotel, just in case, but after the initial meeting

she said, "Oh, leave [your son] here, if you want." So we went off to the hotel, and when we got back, I thought, "I've just left my son with someone I've never met before!" (laughter) It was that easy, it really was that natural. And she rang me up and she said, "You've just left your son with me – I never met you before!" (Faye)

Though Faye has now met [Jen] in person many times, they live a significant distance away from each other and she feels that distance keenly:

You know, when she's got struggles in her life, it breaks my heart that I can't just go round and give her a cuddle and make her a brew and just have a chat. It's got to be on the phone, or it's got to be on MSN. It's not right. (Faye)

7.2 Comparison with offline friendships

It is natural, when discussing online friendships, that comparisons are made between them and more traditional, face-to-face friendships. As has been mentioned several times in this chapter and in Chapter Six, interview participants were asked to consider how they defined friendship and whether they had specific expectations of their friends; some of them spoke about online and offline friends as separate categories, while others did not differentiate between them.

7.2.1 Contrasting online and offline friendships

An obvious difference between online and offline friendships, which was mentioned frequently by interviewees, is geographical proximity; online friends often live a significant distance apart, even on different continents. Several interviewees talked of the importance of spending time together in building and sustaining a friendship, although some acknowledged that this could be done online.

Edwin talked about different levels of friendship; what he termed as “friends” and “good friends”. He used the example of lending money as one way of defining someone as a “good friend”; he considered that to be “a step on” in the scale of friendship. His definition of a general, more casual friend, however, was the same for his online and his offline friends:

You are interested in what they’re doing in life, interested in their advice and commentary on what’s going on in your life. And a mutual support group, shall we say ... that’s kind of ‘friends’. [...]

I wouldn’t consider any of my online friends as what I would term a ‘good friend’, if you see what I mean. They’re people that I know, I like to socialise with and chat with online, and have a laugh with. (Edwin)

Bella did not always find that it was easy for her to maintain and nurture her offline friendships, because her health often precluded meeting up with her local friends, particularly in the evenings when her working friends were available. Bella could have regular, asynchronous contact with her online friends, and there was never a sense that she was letting them down, as she sometimes felt with her offline friends.

Well, if I arrange to meet people in the evening, I quite often end up-- Or if I say I’ll go to a film with people, and then quite often I’m just not up to it when the time comes and I have to phone them up. (Bella)

Kenton also had far more regular contact with his online friends than with his local friends. He had a long daily commute and also had small children, and so he sometimes did not see friends in his village for a month or more. The twice-weekly online gaming sessions were his main social interaction apart from his work.

Faye, as the mother of two small children, one of whom was disabled, did not see her local friends very often, but she was in touch with her online friends every day, throughout the day. She also said that, with the exception of her partner, her online community would be her first point of contact if she had a problem and wanted to “rant or sound off” about it. She would not, however, think of telephoning one of her local friends to talk about a problem; she might tell them about it at a later date, but her immediate reaction would always be to go online. Faye said that this was a significant way in which her “friends in real life” were different to her online friends:

My friends in real life, they’re the sorts of friends that, you say you’re going to meet them, don’t bother turning up. You know. You say, “I really need some help this weekend”: “I’m busy.” But I still class them as friends, because I have fun with them, I have a laugh with them, I tell them things that I don’t tell other people. I suppose they are still friends, because they join in with a part of my life, and I care about them. And I **think** they care about me, some of them – sometimes they’re useless! But they do care about me.

The mums on the forum – if I put a post about [my son] or my day’s gone bad, you’ll get 30 people saying, “I hope you’re okay, I’m sending you some hugs” and everything, and it’s really nice, and I suppose that that **is** a friend, isn’t it? Someone that listens and cares and gives advice? To me, that’s what a friend is. (Faye)

Despite this dichotomy, Faye described the levels of trust with her different groups of friends as being roughly the same. At the time of the interview she was a few months away from getting married, and the guests at the wedding were going to include childhood friends, local friends and people she had met online, including one whom she had not yet met in person.

And at the wedding they’re all going to meet. A girl I grew up with since I was four is going to meet people I’ve known for a few months online. And I love them all the same. I don’t love any of them more because I’ve met them. (Faye)

A difference between online and offline friends for Grace related to her perception of her online interactions as being private and separate from her everyday life.

Discussing the type of information she would share with her online friends, she said that she would not share personal information with a “real life friend”:

I’ve shared things with [online friends] that I wouldn’t with a real life friend. Because they’re away from-- They don’t see all my circumstances. It’s not going to affect their relationship with members of my family, for me to tell them things about members of my family. (Grace)

Grace’s comment echoes the theory that the sense of anonymity and privacy online can lead to a perception of the Internet as a safe space and thus to increased self-disclosure (Whitty & Joinson, 2008, p. 14). It also illustrates the value of online friends to someone like Grace, who felt the need for a virtual space of her own in order to be the version of herself that she believed had been subsumed by her everyday life.

When she thought about contacting someone to discuss a personal issue with, or just because she needed cheering up, Christine said that she would probably not go to one of her fandom friends, but would contact her “best friend who’s not in fandom”. She could not pin down the reason why, although

I think probably she’s shown more willingness to listen to me (laughs), put up with me! (Christine)

This choice could have been because Christine’s online friends are a ready-made group, and although she had met some of them individually face-to-face, she mentioned a sense of frustration that there was one central individual within the group around whom the rest gathered. It is possible that she had not yet reached the level of trust, sharing and loyalty which she described as important in friendship with any of the individuals within the group. It is harder to develop deeper, dyadic relationships within this sort of group friendship, since the members are geographically distant and the majority of meetings involve many people.

For some interviewees, there was no perception of difference between the friends who had originally been made offline, face-to-face, and those made online. Daisy had made many good friends online, and did not differentiate between the different groups of friends.

Because for the rest, I can’t even always remember where I met people any more – if it was online first, or... (Daisy)

Veronica, similarly, did not distinguish between her online and offline friends. As with Daisy, the majority of her friends had been met through fandom. Her online socialising took place almost exclusively on LiveJournal and, in addition to the friends she had originally made on that site, many of her made-offline friends had also joined, at her instigation. As a result, most of the people she was close to were members of LJ, and she sometimes had difficulty in remembering where and how she had met specific individuals.

7.2.2 Different expectations

For some of the interviewees, the expectations they had in terms of levels of support and trust were the key difference between online and offline friendships. For those who considered their online friends to be casual rather than close friends, the difference tended to be described in the same way as the difference between an acquaintance and a long-standing friend.

I have different implicit expectations [...] I would expect different things from them, I would expect different levels of accountability from them. I would have different levels of trust for them. (Francis)

Nancy had made online friends in a Twitter chat channel for PhD students. Twitter chats are public, and tweets are part of the general timeline, but they are tagged with a specific hashtag, or keyword, so that they can be searched for and identified easily. She said that those people had become friends because they had been more sociable or given her more support within the context of the group, but that her levels of trust in them would only extend to issues relating to doing a PhD.

Daisy, as mentioned earlier, did not differentiate between her made-online and made-offline friends in terms of the expectations she had of herself or of them within the context of the friendships. Speaking of the couple she lived with for three years, she said

Once you've been family with somebody, really – struggling to pay the bills, and feed the cats... I don't really differentiate very well, though. Friends are friends. (Daisy)

Tanya, similarly, did not separate her online and offline friends in terms of the expectations she had of them, although she generally kept them apart since her online

friends were almost all met through fandom, and her offline friends were not – and tended to react to discussion of fandom with “a lot of eye-rolling”.

They’ve known me from different situations, so they think of me as being in that situation, rather than my fandom friends, who think of me being in fandom things. (Tanya)

7.2.3 Types of people

There is an expected tendency within personal relationships towards homophily: an assumption that people will make friends with those who are similar to them in gender, sexuality, religion, race, and age (McPherson et al., 2001; Thelwall, 2008). As Graham commented (quoted in Section 6.6.1) there is often a desire to know that people met online are “people like us” before committing to a friendship with, or even to Friending, them. Other than, perhaps, in the case of situational friendships such as those made with work colleagues, people tend to expect friends to “like the things you like” (Andrew) and to be generally similar in terms of background and behaviour.

The interviewees were asked whether the friends they had made online were similar types of people to those they had made offline. Around half of the interviewees who said that they had made good friends online said that they were similar in type to at least some of their offline friends.

Bella felt that most of her friends, whether met online or offline, had similar political views and had other interests in common:

I think you do, online, somehow, instinctively find the people that you would be friends with anyway. (Bella)

That was a sentiment which was shared by many others, who felt that they naturally ‘clicked’ with people online who had similar characteristics to those they were close to offline. Evelyn had taken her made-offline “BFF” (best friend forever) with her to meet up with her online friend, and they had all “got on like a house on fire”.

Kenton and Veronica had both brought offline friends into their online social circles (see Section 7.6 below); for both of them, their friends had similar interests, whether it was gaming or fantasy fandom, and so it was easy to introduce one group to another and to amalgamate them.

Some interviewees, however, either did not think that their online and offline friends were similar, or said that their online friends were like some of their everyday friends, but not all. In many of these cases, the interviewee said that their friends, however they had been made, were similar to different aspects of their own personality.

The friends that Henry had made through his podcasts were very different to his work and everyday friends. The one that he felt particularly close to, although culturally very different because he was from the USA, was “emotionally and intellectually quite similar”. He also said that the one person he had met face-to-face as a result of the podcast had very little in common with him, but that it did not affect their level of friendship:

totally different background – totally, totally different. And that’s great, and that’s refreshing and I really like that, but would I have sought him out as a friend any other way? No, I don’t think so. (Henry)

Enfys said that while her made-online friend was similar to her local friends, she was not at all similar to her more long-standing friends, who lived in urban or metropolitan areas rather than the rural location in which Enfys now lives; she described her old friends as living “very different lives” to hers. Her local friends, and her online friend, were homogeneous to the life that Enfys lives now, while her older friends were homogeneous to her old way of life, or perhaps to different aspects of herself which are less prevalent in her current life.

The same was true of Grace, most of whose local friends were mutual friends with her husband, and while they often had interests or situations in common with her such as church or parenthood, she saw her online friends as very different; they were a reflection of the self that she felt was sometimes hidden “underneath all of those things”.

Faye’s local friends were still “party girls”, without the same responsibilities as Faye, while her online friends were mostly mothers who generally led a less active social life. She felt that the two groups definitely reflected different aspects of her own personality:

...because I’ve got the side of me that didn’t want to be a mum, and didn’t want to stay at home and do nothing all day, I did want to go out and have a

life and have a job and have a career. And then there's a side of me that *is* at home, and *is* a mum, and has to talk to these people else I'll go mad and I won't know what I'm doing, so ... There is two sides of me. It's nice that my friends are a bit of a balance. (Faye)

7.3 Meeting Online Friends Face-to-Face

As discussed in Chapter Six, many of the interviewees felt that a face-to-face meeting was important, either because they were cautious about committing to a friendship with someone who may not be what they seem, or in order to strengthen or cement the friendship.

It is, of course, necessary to exercise a degree of caution when meeting anyone in person for the first time. Most interviewees had had a lot of online interaction before arranging a face-to-face meeting, and had had the first meeting in a public place, or with other friends present.

7.3.1 Developing the friendship

For some interviewees, as mentioned in Section 6.4.3, an entirely online friendship did not seem 'real', and they needed to meet in person, at least once, in order to validate the friendship. Several people said that it helped to "put a face to a name" and that it made a difference to know, for example, whether someone moved their hands a lot when they talked. However, it was also clear that, for many interviewee, a face-to-face meeting had not significantly altered the depth or the dynamics of their online friendship; rather, it provided added value, in terms of being able to visualise their friend.

I don't know, meeting people – it's not that important, in terms of becoming friends anyway. I think that's a sort of separate thing. (Veronica)

Lydia had met several online friends in person, and although they had got on extremely well, she did not think that the meetings had made any difference to the depth of their friendships.

Because we'd talked so much anyway, beforehand. We'd had a number of conversations about all sorts of things, so we knew-- we had plenty of common ground. (Lydia)

Similarly, Tanya said that meeting face-to-face had not changed her friendships, due to the amount of mutual self-disclosure she had had with her friends prior to seeing them in person:

because when you actually-- When you're writing to somebody, which is what an email comes down to, if it's a proper email rather than just, "Hello, how are you?" sort of thing, or "Hello stranger!" sort of thing, then you do actually talk to each other, and it's more intimate, when you're talking on a letter. (Tanya)

For Christine, meeting members of her LiveJournal community in person had been an important step towards being able to call them "friends".

One of the things on-- certainly with our community on LiveJournal, is that there's almost a kind of taboo of putting your own face on-- whereas on Facebook, obviously, you would know who you're talking to. But we don't. So it's great to sort of have a physical persona to put to the username and what they were posting about, and just talking to someone you can find out a lot more about them and their circumstance, and they'll tell you things, obviously, face-to-face, that they probably wouldn't put online. (Christine)

For Evelyn, meeting one of her made-online friends in person led to the friendship changing and developing significantly.

Because before I'd met him, I thought he was a bit of a lout – he came across that way, in his comments and his type of comments – and then I met him, and I thought, well, he's not a lout, that's just his online persona, and he was a really nice guy. (Evelyn)

Veronica had met online friends in person in a variety of different ways. She met several people at the wedding of one of her LiveJournal friends, who

was an American who was living in England and getting married to an English chap, and because she didn't have-- her friends and family, nearly all of them could not come over, couldn't afford to come over, so she was like, "LJ Friends that are in UK! Come to my wedding!" So I did, and also met other of her friends, who were also mutual friends, there. (Veronica)

One of the people she met at that wedding was introduced by Veronica to a charity organisation which she belonged to, and which her friend subsequently became very active in. They have become very close friends and as a result of their involvement in the charity are now part of a "whole network of mutual friendships".

Isla did not feel that meeting in person had made a significant difference to the level of friendship she had with one online friend whom she had met, although it did mean that she discovered he was a lot older than she had expected:

it was a relief in a way, because he was non-threatening. And I could see that he had a lot of experience and wisdom that I could learn from. So it was actually a positive thing that he was older. (Isla)

Isla did suggest that the friendship had developed faster as a result of meeting than it would have done if they had not met.

The language has become shorter, more concise. There's a certain shared reference, which there wasn't at first. That may be just the way that the friendship would develop anyway. I think it's ... more free and more relaxed. Certainly, for me, there's less concern in it, as to who is this person I'm talking to, because I now know who he is, and I now know who his wife is, and that it's very genuine. (Isla)

Tanya spoke of meeting two online friends in person; before she had got to know them online she "knew *of* them", since they were long-standing and highly-regarded members of the UK fandom community she was involved in. She found that they were

very different to the people that I had in my head, before I met them. Not better or worse, just different. I re-evaluated. (Tanya)

Having met them in person she was far less "in awe of them", and is now close friends with them both.

7.3.2 A less positive experience

As may be expected, meeting in person after a period of online interaction can have a significant impact on a relationship. The majority of interviewees who had met an online friend face-to-face had had positive experiences, although a few had been disappointed by their face-to-face meeting.

Although Isla had had a successful meeting with one made-online friend, the other meeting which she mentioned had been less positive. Again, they had interests in common, but Isla found her to be "very straight-laced", which was a disappointment to her:

I think it is something that would limit our relationship, because I would feel the need to be careful about what I said. It's definitely put [the friendship] into

a narrower channel that it might otherwise have been, whereas when I met [my other friend] it was sort of, “Yeah, fine, we can actually be friends,” and it’s widened it. (Isla)

In some cases, the decision to include a third party, while a sensible precaution, hampered the success of the meeting. Grace felt that including her husband in the meeting with her online friends had somewhat stifled their interaction, since he was not as close to them as she was, and had only got to know them through Grace. Although the meeting had been “amazing”, she felt that the different “boxes” of her life had intersected and it was not a completely comfortable experience.

The second time Minerva met her made-online friend, [Annie] had come for a holiday to a nearby town, with another of her friends. Unfortunately, they did not have the chance to meet as often or for as long as she had hoped; she felt that the friend had stopped them from spending time together and that [Annie] was “under this other woman’s influence”. She felt let down and hurt, and did not speak to [Annie] for two weeks afterwards, which was quite a long time for them not to talk. This experience seems to have affected their friendship, at least on Minerva’s part; when asked if their relationship had returned to normal, she said:

It sounds like it, as far as she’s concerned, but I’m not sure about me. I’ve got an invitation to one of her son’s weddings. This was arranged in our [first] meeting, but I don’t want to go. [...] Because of this other friend, and because-- I don’t know. I don’t know, I don’t really know. It’s not just the other friend. I don’t-- I shall feel a bit uncomfortable, I think, and I don’t like feeling uncomfortable. (Minerva)

7.3.3 Meeting for a specific purpose

Some interviewees had had meetings with online friends for practical purposes, rather than for entirely social reasons. April had met someone through Freecycle¹⁶ when he had taken some kitchen equipment she did not need, and had maintained a brief casual friendship with him before he left the area. Similarly, Hermione had made an online friend on Facebook, through mutual friends, but the first time they met was because the friend was selling something that Hermione wanted to buy.

¹⁶ Freecycle email lists enable people to give and receive goods for free within their local area. There are over 500 local groups, which are part of the international Freecycle network.

Minerva's first meeting with [Annie] had been arranged quite hurriedly so that she could support her through some important, health-related appointments, and it had entailed staying with [Annie] for several days. She had been

very, very wary of actually turning this into a face-to-face friendship, because we got on so well, and I was really afraid that it would change if we met (Minerva)

and also because they were quite intense circumstances in which to meet for the first time. However, it had gone well, and their relationship had carried on as normal, at least until their second meeting a month or two later.

7.3.4 Different in person

Sharing photographs of oneself is easy online, and nearly all social networking sites allow users to have personalised avatars or images which represent them across the site. However, many people, as mentioned by Christine in Section 7.3.1 above, do not use their own photograph as their avatar, whether as a way of maintaining a degree of privacy or anonymity, or because, as in Christine's example, they are conforming to the community's norms.

Despite the ease of sharing photographs in social networking sites, many people choose not to, and as a result meeting in person can often cause a sense of disconnection between the online persona of a made-online friend and their physical appearance, mannerisms, or speech. This was mentioned by a number of respondents as a response when meeting an online friend in person, although it was never reported as something which had a permanent negative impact on the friendship.

There is often a significant difference between the way in which people express themselves in text and the way they behave in a face-to-face situation. It is natural to develop a mental picture of the way that someone looks when one has only heard their voice, such as in the case of radio presenters, but far more difficult to imagine the appearance of someone known only through their written communication. In the relatively early days of social networking sites, McKenna et al. (2002) stated that online relationships were unlikely to progress to offline meetings unless those involved had first moved their interaction to the telephone (p. 19). According to the experiences of this study's interviewees, this is no longer a common step in that

process, and so the majority of them had not had even the small clue of the sound of their made-online friend's voice before they finally met in person.

Andrew and Henry both mentioned that they had been surprised by the way in which people they had encountered online had turned out to be entirely different in person:

I always get surprises. Particularly from people who you've been communicating with for a long time and they-- although their personality is the same when you meet them, physically they're completely different. You don't-- Not at all how you imagined them. It's really strange, that. You have to try not to let it show (laughter), not to look too shocked. (Andrew)

... you do form an image in your mind of how you think they will be, and then you meet them and-- I'm thinking of one person in particular, who turned out to be a little bespectacled bald academic chap. Lovely guy, but totally different from what I was expecting. (Henry)

Evelyn had agreed to meet her made-online friend, despite thinking that he was "a bit of a lout", and discovered that he was quite different from his online persona:

He was lovely. A really nice chap – different than he was on Facebook, because he's very well-spoken and very educated and very 'private sector senior type manager', and he didn't come across like that on Facebook. So it was really interesting, but since that I like him more. (Evelyn)

Minerva was the exception in terms of telephone use; her friendship with [Annie] had migrated from email to telephone within a month or so of their initial contact and they had had very little subsequent online interaction. Despite this, and despite having "talked about things like that" (physical appearance), Minerva found it quite difficult to reconcile the woman she met with the friend she spoke to so frequently.

She didn't look, physically, like my impression of her. It wasn't that she ... didn't just look like I thought she might – I hadn't really visualised how she would look. It was that her physical appearance didn't fit the psychological picture I'd got of her. [...] Her physical appearance didn't fit somehow, for me, and that was uncomfortable – for about an hour and a half after I met her. And then I just got used to her voice and everything--

SKM: Was she at all different in the way that she talked to you? Was her personality at all different in a face-to-face--

Minerva: No. No. [She was] exactly the same as she was on the phone.

Minerva's discomfort with the discrepancy between her idea and the reality of [Annie]'s appearance lasted for a relatively long time, in comparison to reports from other interviewees. She described it as briefly altering their relationship, although it

had reverted to normal when Minerva returned home and their telephone conversations resumed. It is possible that she reacted more strongly than she would have done if it had been a more casual meeting; however, because their first meeting involved Minerva going to stay with [Annie] in order to help her deal with a difficult situation, the circumstances were already stressful.

Grace had seen many photographs of her online friend before they met, but meeting in person highlighted a slightly different aspect of the contrast between online and offline:

That was interesting, because it shows how much we Photoshop our photographs. (laughter) [...] she had a lot of photos of herself and her partner, that they'd taken of each other, so we'd seen hundreds of photos of them both, and-- She probably thought the same about me! It shows how much we do touch up our photos! (Grace)

7.3.5 Wishing for a meeting

There were a few interviewees who had not yet met with their online friends in person, whether for reasons of time or distance or money, but were very keen to do so. Bella was due to meet a long-standing online friend a few months after the interview, and was very excited at the prospect, although she also had concerns:

I mean, they know how old I am, because I'm older than some of them, by quite a bit. You know, it's-- because obviously in the nature of a music thing, we were all ages. And I used to feel quite self-conscious that I was one of the older ones. I suppose I've got a certain amount of self-consciousness about that. I worry because I get tired early, and it'll sort of take energy. And yes, I'm a shy person, so-- Because I am such a shy person is possibly why these things matter so much to me. (Bella)

Nancy had had an opportunity to attend a meet-up with some of the friends she had made in the Twitter PhD student chat channel, but in the end had not been able to attend. She was hoping to do so soon, because

[the chat] is great, but that remoteness – virtual remoteness – is both an advantage and a disadvantage, and it's that face-to-face contact, and I think being a part-time PhD student, that social isolation is quite overwhelming. (Nancy)

7.4 Online Friendships Staying Online

Although some interviewees had not met their online friends despite wanting to, others were content for the relationship to remain online. As noted earlier, for many people the meeting was a step in the friendship process rather than a final destination; it was important in order to strengthen the relationship but there was not usually a desire to move the friendship from entirely online to entirely offline.

7.4.1 Unmet friends

Some made-online friends were unlikely ever to be met in person, usually for reasons of distance, and for most of the participants this did not have a significant impact on the friendship, although it made the online interaction more valuable.

Of the three friends Evelyn had made through a Facebook game, two were unmet, and were likely to remain so. Although they both lived in the UK, unlike the one she had met, she had no immediate plans to meet them in person. She said that she would be interested in meeting them, but that the distance made it difficult and that she was “quite happy with it the way it is”. They chatted on Facebook regularly, both on each other’s Walls and by private messages, and kept up to date about each other’s lives, but she did not consider those friendships to be as close as that of the friend she met in person, and their interaction had not migrated from Facebook to email.

Henry had only met one person face-to-face as a result of his podcasts, and that only briefly, but despite that he felt extremely close to all of the friends he had made through the recordings and the affiliated Twitter account. He did not seem to have any particular desire to meet them in person, although he valued the relationships highly.

7.4.2 Regular contact

Although Lydia had met “about a third” of her LiveJournal friends list, the majority remained entirely online. She did not usually post daily in her own journal, but she commented on her friends’ journals “nearly every day”.

Tanya was in touch with several of her closest made-online friends every day, and with others every two or three days. She did not belong to any social networking

sites, and did not mention using email to contact her made-offline friends: as a result her interaction with them was either by telephone or in person, and was far less frequent, with the exception of work friends, than with her online friends.

Since the majority of Veronica's friends, whether made-online or made-offline, were members of LiveJournal, she was in touch with them frequently. Like Lydia, she went onto the site every day, though said that she may not actually be directly in touch with them each day:

You sort of feel like you are, just if you're reading what they've been posting, but-- (Veronica)

7.4.3 Remaining virtual

There were a number of interviewees who had met an online friend in person, probably only once, and were unlikely to meet them again, but who had continued to maintain and develop the friendship online.

After meeting fellow football supporters and email list members at a match, Arthur Friended a few of them on Facebook. He said that he was unlikely to meet them again, or at least not very often, but that by Friending them they would automatically be notified of an "open house" which he held every year. As part of his unofficial filtering, or pre-Friending filtering, process (see Section 6.2.2), he had already identified them as people he would be willing to include in that open invitation.

I don't think there's anyone on my list [...] whom I wouldn't want to invite to an open house, though I wouldn't expect them to come. (Arthur)

While Hermione's made-online friend was local, they had only met once or twice and she did not consider them to be part of her everyday life, nor did she imagine that they would become so. Hermione described them as a "very good friend online", although when she thought about the friendship in the context of her everyday life and her other friendships, she called it "casual". This may be because of Hermione's natural caution about online friendships in general:

I would consider my real-world friends to be *more* friends. (Hermione)

Most of Grace's group of online friends lived in America, and so meeting some of them in person had been a rare opportunity; she believed that if they had been based in

the UK that they could have become a regular part of her life, but the distance made that impossible and so they remained as entirely online friends.

Bella's made-online friends were also likely to stay entirely online, since it was difficult for her to travel any distance, and they were spread across the world. Although she wished to meet them in person, she derived a great deal of value from her online interactions and was content to maintain and develop the relationships via Facebook.

7.5 The Integration of Online Friendships into Offline Life

Questions 11 and 12 of the online questionnaire, used to collect data in the first phase of the study, asked, "Have any of your online friends become a regular part of your 'real life' (met your family, regular visits, etc)?" and "If you answered 'Yes' to question 11, please provide more information (as much as you are comfortable with)." (see Appendix B). Question 11 was a primary interview indicator, and Question 12 was used as a way of confirming or excluding potential interviewees.

Fourteen interviewees said that their online friends had become a regular part of their everyday life. Examples of this included having regular meetings, introducing made-online friends to family and friends, going on holiday together and staying in each other's houses.

7.5.1 Regular meetings

Regular, although infrequent, meetings were mentioned by several interviewees. For most people, frequent meetings were not possible due to distance.

Enfys' made-online friend lived a few hours' drive from her and so they did not meet often, although they were in regular touch via email and the telephone.

We tend to go on weekends and short breaks down in [her area], so we'll always meet up then. Or we've been to her house a couple of times, she's been up here for parties... (Enfys)

Lydia had had regular meetings with online friends although, with the exception of one particularly close friend, none of them had met her family because Lydia lived some distance from them.

7.5.2 Meeting with family and friends

Most of the interviewees who considered that their online friends had been integrated into their offline lives mentioned introducing their friends to their family and friends. In some cases it was simply a matter of introducing a made-online friend to a partner on one occasion, but in others the friend had become a part of their extended family or had made friends with the interviewee's everyday friends.

Christine's LiveJournal friends predominantly socialised as a group, although she mentioned some dyadic relationships among the members. She had been visited by some of the group members, who had met her husband and children.

Several of Daisy's online friends had become close to her family. Her long-standing friend who had been met in a MOO was still part of her extended family, even though she and Daisy had become less close in recent years, and Daisy had since moved to a different country.

I mean, she comes to my family gatherings sometimes, and stuff. She's really-- My family knows her family, and vice versa. (Daisy)

This was also true of the couple who Daisy had lived with for three years, who she described as her best friends and as “*really* part of the family”:

They talk to-- they play with my sister when I'm not there. (Daisy)

Enfys' friend had attended parties at Enfys' house, and had met many of her local friends as well as her partner and son. Kenton's group of gaming friends, most of whom had initially been met online, had regular meet-ups, usually involving their families.

7.5.3 Holidays and visits

Several interviewees spoke of going to stay with their online friend, or vice versa, and also of going on holiday together. For some, their first meeting involved going to stay at their friend's house, which seems to contradict the sense of caution which was mentioned by so many of them. Daisy had been talking online to her friend for “a few months” before driving 300 miles to stay with her for a weekend:

I thought, well, yeah, I'll go and meet her for a weekend, how bad can it be? [And] it wasn't bad at all. (Daisy)

Christine mentioned group holidays with her LiveJournal friends, and visiting each other's houses, although she acknowledged that the socialising tended to be organised by one individual in the group. She was unsure whether the group friendship would survive without that individual at its core.

Faye's partner and children got on well with her made-online best friend's family, and at the time of the interview they were planning a holiday together. Another of her online friends had been to visit for a weekend on several occasions, and was also due to attend Faye's hen weekend, where she would meet two of Faye's local friends and one of her childhood friends. Faye had originally had some concerns about mixing different groups of friends together, but they had all been in touch with each other on Facebook and were getting on well.

Francis and his partner had met another couple through an online forum who lived quite a distance away, and they had stayed at each other's homes on several occasions.

Tanya had been to stay with one of her online friends after only a very brief meeting at a fan gathering:

When I said I was coming up to Scotland, she said she'd put me up, and then--
SKM: So when you met at the [fan gathering], was that-- Did you spend much time with her on her own?

Tanya: No, no. That was the surprise. We chatted. We'd got to know each other a bit. And she decided that I was the kind of person that she wouldn't mind spending time with, so--

7.5.4 Attending events

Attending the weddings of online friends, or inviting online friends to a wedding, was a fairly common theme in the interviews. Veronica had met several online friends in person for the first time at another online friend's wedding, and had become particularly close to one of them:

Yeah, she was a friend of a friend at the wedding. So yeah, met her there and just got closer and closer. [And] we went to her wedding... (Veronica)

Minerva had been invited to her online friend's son's wedding. Francis and his partner had been invited to the civil partnership of two of their online friends, and had also invited several made-online friends to their own civil partnership. Faye's

wedding would gather together her family and offline friends with her online friends, one of whom she had never actually met in person.

Other events were mentioned by the interviewees, such as Enfys and her partner's adoption of their son; her made-online friend was part of that celebration. Veronica, as the first step of introducing her online friend to the charity organisation she belonged to, had taken her to its annual banquet, where she had met several of Veronica's long-standing friends.

7.5.5 Involvement at a distance

Some online friends were a significant part of interviewees' offline lives without actually being there in person. Faye, for example, spoke of the way that she mentioned her online friends in everyday conversation with her "real friends", in the same way that she would mention other "real" friends or family.

For many of the interviewees, contact with their online friends, whether they had ever been or were ever likely to be met in person, was a regular part of their day. For Bella, they often served as a substitute for the offline friends she could not always meet up with in person; for Faye, they were an essential support and information source; for Grace, they were her "private space"; and for Lydia, they were editors and critics of her creative writing.

7.6 The Other Way Around: Managing Offline Friendships Online

A significant way in which the advent of the World Wide Web has affected friendship is in the way that it is used to keep in touch with people who were originally met offline. Around two-thirds of the interviewees talked about how they used the Internet to maintain or enhance their everyday friendships.

7.6.1 Reviving friendships

For many interviewees, sites such as Facebook and Friends Reunited had enabled them to get in touch with people they had not seen or had contact with for many years and to revive old friendships. Facebook is useful for rediscovering old connections,

for example with old school friends: it allows users to see a list of people with whom they have Friends in common, and to search by school or university or workplace.

James had attended a school reunion not long before the interview took place, which had been “completely driven” by Friends Reunited and subsequently by Facebook. Before he had re-encountered his friends on those sites, there had only been one school friend with whom he had stayed in contact; since then the larger group has been in regular contact on Facebook:

I would say that that’s a weekly basis with most of my friends on Facebook – the ones that I would consider old friends. (James)

Similarly, Arthur had renewed friendships with university friends, most of whom he had not seen since they left university:

So six of those people, old university friends, now in touch with on Facebook – would welcome the chance to meet them again in the flesh if the occasion arises. That’s specifically because of a social network, we’ve hooked up again. I’d like to see them again, but these are people who comment – a number of them comment quite often – and we do comment on each other’s stuff, and I’d say that, yeah, we’ve re-forged the links. (Arthur)

7.6.2 Enhancing offline acquaintanceships

Several interviewees mentioned the ways in which social networking sites can be used to improve or enhance relationships which would otherwise have remained at a very casual level.

I would say that I think I have probably-- friendships have developed online, with people I’ve met infrequently. [...] they would typically be friends of friends. So people I might meet at other people’s parties, and then become Friends on Facebook and then get to know them better that way (Olivia)

There are people I’ve met, accidentally if you like, at conferences, giving papers and so on, who I’ve subsequently discovered in their online persona have a lot more in common than ever came out of that initial casual meeting. So we may have *met* once, in a fairly insignificant meeting in the ‘real world’, and then extended that connection and discovered affinities in the online world. (Ivor)

7.6.3 Casual maintenance

Social networking sites were very useful for interviewees for keeping in casual contact with people with whom they did not want to lose touch, but who they were unlikely to see, or even to want to see, regularly.

I find it's quite nice to be included in what other people are getting on with. It's probably a fraction more important when you're in a situation like mine [working from home], where you really don't have much physical contact with people from day to day. (James)

The thing I really like about Facebook is that it means that I don't lose touch with people that I might otherwise have lost touch with, that I would regret losing touch with. So you kind of know all those people are there, and that's {safe}, and so I might not be in touch with them very often, but I am occasionally, and it's great to be able to hear their news and chat to them sometimes. (Olivia)

Several interviewees mentioned keeping in touch with old work colleagues using OSNs. There were a variety of reasons for this: not wanting to lose contact with people with whom one has had a situational friendship; maintaining useful professional networks; and not wanting to seem rude by cutting off all contact. LinkedIn was used by some interviewees for this purpose, since it is a professional and more formal site than, for example, Facebook, and enabled them to maintain some distance while staying connected.

7.6.4 Gaming for maintenance

The subject of using online games as a casual way of maintaining offline friendships was mentioned by several interviewees. Bella and Declan had both talked about playing Scrabble on Facebook with their friends, which entailed chat within the game as well as the game itself.

Kendra was very clear about her boundaries when it came to socialising online and that she would not consider moving the game friends she had made in World of Warcraft into her everyday life. In 2010, WOW introduced an optional feature called 'Real ID', which allowed players who were mutual "Real ID friends" (Real ID, 2013, n.p.) to see each other's real names and those of their other Real ID friends, among other elements. Kendra did not use that with her made-online gaming friends, although she also played WOW with offline friends:

I've only Real ID'd people that I know personally, out of WOW. [...] If I've already got a relationship outside, I will continue that within WOW, but I won't take the WOW one out. (Kendra)

For Kenton, the time he spent gaming online constituted a large proportion of his social life.

Online gaming to me is about socialising with friends online, doing something.
(Kenton)

Although some of Kenton's game friends were made-online friends, they also included work colleagues and his best friend from college. The in-game chat included discussion about the game and tactics, but also involved personal chat and "taking the mickey".

Peggy, who was the interviewee with the most recent access to the Internet, had joined Facebook in order to maintain contact with a good friend who had moved away:

the only way that she communicates is via the computer, and therefore I had to create a Facebook account, on the grounds that that was the only way, and also play World of Warcraft (Peggy)

Because her friend spent so much time playing WOW, Peggy had continued to play in order to maintain the friendship. When asked if she enjoyed playing the game for its own sake, she said, "Sometimes I do, and sometimes I don't".

Peggy was in fact quite unusual in her use of social networking sites, since she did not tend to use them to interact with people who she saw on a regular basis, such as work colleagues or people involved in her main hobby.

7.6.5 Everyday contact

Sites such as Facebook encourage their users to – and assume that users will – Friend people that they already know, including those they see on a regular basis. For people who are not always able to socialise with local friends in person, such as Bella, being able to have regular contact online is very important in order to keep the friendship active and current.

Facebook was by far the most widely-used SNS among the interviewees, and so it is not surprising that it was mentioned more than any other site when it came to relationship maintenance.

And then equally [Facebook's] good to keep up with people I see more often and chat with more often. (Olivia)

Henry was a heavy Twitter user, and mentioned a colleague with whom he also has regular contact on Twitter:

it's that bizarre thing, when we do meet in person, and we just continue the Twitter conversation without a break. So we just-- there's no break between the conversation. It just continues. (Henry)

Because Veronica's offline socialising was sometimes limited by her health problems, and by having small children, she often relied on the Internet for her day-to-day social interaction. While she had met many of her made-online friends and felt that, in most cases, it had not significantly altered the depth or quality of the relationship, she had found that encouraging "pretty much" all of her close offline friends to join LiveJournal and stay in touch that way meant that their relationships had become more complex and deep.

And definitely, people that I have known for years, we've become closer once they've got on LJ because, yes, I knew them for years, but even then we met once a week at university, or we met every few months, after we'd left university.

And you find out things about people-- And often people are much more complex, and people that I thought were really confident aren't. That kind of thing. I do think in some ways you're seeing the real person in a way that-- face-to-face we often have a façade on – we're putting on our face to do our thing. (Veronica)

Several interviewees mentioned using emails to keep in everyday touch with friends; perhaps because of the ease of doing so while at work, where social networking sites may be blocked.

7.6.6 Long distance friendships

Maintenance of friendships with people who live a considerable distance away is far more easily and cheaply managed using the Internet than by any other means. Several interviewees mentioned the importance of email and Facebook, for example, in keeping in touch with their long-distance friends and family.

I do live really far away from where I grew up. I mean, all of my contact with my family any more is on Skype and Facebook and things. I talk to my little sister on Facebook more than anything else, because the time difference and everything, so. We're thousands of miles away. (Daisy)

I also have friends in other places who I keep in touch with online, who are friends because they're friends, but then I don't see them. I don't tend to talk to them, so I tend to communicate with them online. (Torsten)

When Enfys talked about her close made-online friend, she said that she had considered her to be a “real friend” before they had met in person. She suggested that a reason for this might be because she was used to maintaining long-distance friendships via email and social networking sites, and had done so for a long time, and was therefore comfortable with establishing and developing close relationships via a text-based medium.

Evelyn had worked as a camp counsellor at an American summer camp for several years in her late teens (about twenty years ago) and was still in touch with the people she had met there.

The only group of friends I have kept in touch with, through personal emails, photographs and Facebook messages, are all the people that I worked with when I was at camp. There’s about 23 of them, and they’re all on Facebook, and I talk to *all* of them, all the time. Bonded forever... (Evelyn)

On Facebook, Bella had “re-found” friends from the city where she had lived 16 years earlier.

And part of what’s nice about those friendships is that, because they’re putting up things about their everyday lives and other people are coming in on the conversation, you’ve got much more of a sense of what they’re doing and what life is like for them. I mean, if you’re going to write a letter you sort of save everything up, whereas you can just make an off-the-cuff comment or a joke or, you know, or “Ha ha, look at this picture that I’ve found!” And I do like that very much, yes, being able to keep up with them in a casual, day-to-day way, even though I’m not near them. (Bella)

Kenton used LinkedIn to keep in touch with former colleagues, using it exclusively as a professional network. He tended to post infrequently on Facebook, but used it to maintain friendships with people who lived abroad, and also to keep in touch with family members who lived at a distance.

Social networking sites replaced letters and also, for some people, telephone calls:

I would say that the online aspect has strengthened and has, in some cases, allowed me to reawaken some friendships and some dialogues, that I hadn’t-- if it was left to me and phoning people, would probably slip. I’m rubbish at phoning people. I suddenly look at the clock, thinking I was meant to phone someone, and it’s, Oh, it’s really late. But you can-- That’s one of the great things about the online stuff. (Kendra)

7.6.7 Replacing the telephone

As mentioned by Kendra above, email and social networking sites often take the place of the telephone. However, while for Kendra not using the telephone was a matter of forgetfulness, for others it was a more definite choice.

I don't like talking to people on the phone. I *really* don't like-- I never have. (Faye)

I don't like talking on the phone. (Isla)

I find it difficult to phone people (Bella)

I'm just not in the habit of calling friends, and I don't know why (Olivia)

I hate phones. No, really, I hate talking on the phone. (Veronica)

Interviewees gave a number of reasons for their dislike of using the telephone. Bella and Faye both mentioned a dislike of interrupting their friends by calling them. Bella said that it felt "less demanding" to leave a Facebook message instead; Faye said that she didn't "want to intrude on people".

Faye and Isla both mentioned feeling more comfortable communicating in text. Faye described herself as "[writing] better than I speak" and said that she liked to be able to think about what she has to say. Isla, who has Asperger Syndrome, said that her speech can be "quite staccato" and so writing allowed her to "be herself" more than talking on the telephone.

Olivia was unsure of the reason why she did not like to use the telephone, although she said that it was not something which had only started since she began to use social networking sites.

Facebook allows you to just dive in and leave a quick message, and it's kind of efficient in that. You can keep up with someone and send them a supporting message, or whatever, but it doesn't require a *whole* phone call. Which makes me sound awful! (Olivia)

Veronica reported having “always hated” phones, and thought that it might have been something in which she took after her mother, who also disliked them. She was quite comfortable talking to people face-to-face, though she preferred to contact friends via email or LiveJournal messages.

But none of this phone malarkey in the middle. (Veronica)

7.7 Summary

This chapter focused on the interview participants’ experiences of online friendship: the benefits which they gained from the relationships, the way that they compared to offline friendships, and the reasons for meeting, or choosing not to meet, online friends in person. It also examined the ways in which online friends had been integrated into participants’ everyday lives, and, conversely, the ways in which offline friendships were maintained and enhanced using social networking sites.

While some participants fulfilled the popular stereotype of people who were more comfortable socialising online due to shyness, physical or verbal disability or other health-related social barriers (Bowker, 2008; McKenna et al., 2002), none of them were permanently trapped behind those barriers, nor did they allow themselves to be defined by them. Without exception, the online friendships described by the interviewees had been positive additions to and influences on their lives. Levels of support and the depth of friendships online were comparable to those received from offline, everyday friends.

The expectations or requirements which were reported of friends and acquaintances were also, to a great extent, the same online as they are offline. Contact with online friends tended to be more frequent than with offline friends, due to the ease of asynchronous communication. Meeting in person was generally seen as something which added value to the friendship in terms of added information about how someone spoke or behaved, but for most of the interviewees it did not substantially alter the depth or quality of their friendship.

For many of the participants who had made an online friend, there seemed to be a similarity in the way that they viewed their friends. For most of them, online friends gave them somewhere to let off steam, to cheer themselves up, and to offer and receive a relatively low level of emotional support. In many cases, when it came to choosing a friend to ask for help

or for support which was at a deeper level than, say, having a bad day at work, they tended to go to offline friends.

Interview participants also discussed the integration of their online friends into their everyday lives, through involvement in their everyday social circles, regular meetings, holidays and visits. The opposite was also reported: use of online social networks to maintain and enhance offline friendships which would otherwise have been sidelined due to distance or time.

The development of social networking sites has not only had an impact on how friendships are created and developed, but also on the way that existing, made-offline friendships are managed and maintained. In essence, SNSs have taken the place of village greens, social clubs, letters and the telephone, and while the means of making and maintaining friendships have changed, the essential characteristics have not.

Chapter Eight

Conclusion to the Research

This chapter reflects on the results and the limitations of the research. The research question, aim and objectives are revisited and the ways in which they were met is discussed. The limitations of the study are considered, as well as its contribution to the research area, and some suggestions for future research are outlined.

This study set out to explore whether the increasing use of online social networks has changed the ways in which friendships are created and maintained. While the initial focus was on the friendships which are created online and the influence that they can have on participants' everyday lives, it is clear that the reverse effect is just as important: the use of online interaction to sustain and to enhance everyday, offline friendships.

8.1 The Research Aim

The aim of the research, as discussed in Chapter One, was to explore UK-based Internet users' experiences of creating and maintaining friendships on social networking sites and online communities, with a particular focus on how online friendships compare to and affect participants' face-to-face social networks. This was achieved in two ways: the results of the online questionnaire showed that almost 75% of UK respondents had made a friend online; of those, 65% stated that they had integrated at least one online friend into their everyday, offline life by introducing them to other friends or to family, having regular meetings, working together, holidaying together, or living together. The interviews provided further examples of the expansion of online friendships into everyday life and how they were evaluated in comparison to face-to-face friendships. This is discussed in more detail in Section 8.3 below.

8.2 The Central Research Question

With a view to meeting the above aim, the central research question was: To what extent does regular online interaction affect participants' offline, everyday social networks?

It is clear from the results of this research that online friendships can have a significant effect on the everyday lives of those involved. The research question has been answered in several different ways. The development of online friendships is clearly beneficial for many people, providing support, affection and the opportunity to share experiences which may not be available to them in their everyday lives. Although some of these friendships remain wholly online, many of them result in regular, albeit infrequent, meetings, and some migrate to become entirely offline and are assimilated into face-to-face social circles. Although the majority of the friendships discussed within this research were dyadic, one-to-one relationships, there were also examples of group friendships, where an online group within a larger community become particularly close, perhaps because they had had the opportunity to meet in person. These group friendships are often built around common interests, and are less likely to migrate entirely offline.

In addition to online friends becoming part of offline social circles, a secondary effect of regular online interaction is the freedom which it gives to individuals to show different aspects of their personality, or to indulge passions which cannot be indulged in their everyday lives. In some cases, confidence or knowledge which had been built up online was exported into participants' offline lives, adding value to their everyday interactions.

In addition to integrating online friendships into offline social networks, participants incorporated offline friends into their online social worlds, using sites such as Facebook and LiveJournal to sustain and manage relationships with friends who were originally met in person. Thus friendships, whether casual or close, which might have faded with time and lack of regular contact, are maintained through online interaction and, for some participants such as Veronica, become closer as a result:

But it does occur to me that [...] it's gone the other way a lot. People I knew in real life, who I've then Friendened on LJ, I have got to know them better. (Veronica)

Finally, as a result of the increasingly widespread use of online social networks, old and inactive friendships are being revived or reinvigorated for users of all ages; school friends and old work colleagues become a part of social circles where once, prior to the advent of sites such as Friends Reunited and Facebook, they would have been relegated to memory. Consequently, for many people their offline social networks are significantly larger than they would have been twenty years ago; despite this, or perhaps because of it, even heavy

SNS users reported a lack of interest in making new friends, whether online or offline, as a result of already having “more than [they] know what to do with” (Declan).

8.3 Meeting the Research Objectives

This section addresses the four research objectives and how they have been met by this study. As outlined in Chapter One, these objectives were:

1. to discover whether participants in online social networks perceive fellow members to be their friends;
2. to explore whether the type of online social network determines the level of friendship found with other members;
3. to discover whether participants in online social networks evaluate the friendships developed online differently to those they developed offline; and
4. to explore whether, and why, online friendships are integrated into users’ offline, everyday lives.

Each of these objectives was met to a greater or lesser extent by both the quantitative and qualitative elements of this research.

8.3.1 Making friends in online social networks

There was an overwhelmingly positive response to Question 8 of the online questionnaire, asking whether respondents had ever made friends with someone originally met online; just over 73% of the UK-based respondents had done so. Furthermore, of the top ten OSNs named by questionnaire respondents, eight are predominantly focused on socialising and encouraging interaction among members. The remaining two (LinkedIn and Flickr) tend, judging by the answers to Question 12 and the interviewees’ experiences, to be used for more practical or information-seeking purposes.

The interviewees showed a significant amount of caution when it came to labelling online contacts as ‘friends’; for most of them a face-to-face meeting or a long period of online interaction involving a substantial exchange of information was required before crossing that line. Nonetheless, most of them felt that they had made friends

online and that their online environments were generally friendly and comfortable places to be.

Objective 1 was substantially met by the research, although a more specific question, perhaps during the interview phase, asking whether participants felt generally friendly towards fellow members of their online social networks, would have provided more explicit results. Nonetheless, the number of individuals who reported at least one made-online friendship indicated that there was at least a sense of openness towards other online social networkers.

8.3.2 Experiences in difference OSNs

Respondents were asked in the questionnaire to list the different online social networks to which they belonged, and this information was used to guide the interviews. The interviewees belonged to a variety of different OSNs, and the number of sites of which they were members ranged from one to nine.

The most popular social networking site was Facebook, with 32 of 36 interviewees as members. None of the interviewees reported making new friends on Facebook, although Evelyn and Edwin had both Friended strangers for the purposes of progressing in a Facebook game. However, some interviewees had Friended a friend of a friend, either in order to play a game (Declan and Bella) or as the result of a recommendation. However, these friends-of-friends tended to be viewed with a degree of suspicion until they had had extended contact with the interviewee or had been met in person. Facebook's stated mission of enabling people "to stay connected with friends and family" ("Key Facts", 2014) suggests that it is focused more on the maintenance of existing relationships than the development of new ones, and this seems to be borne out by the experiences of research participants.

Although some interviewees had formed casual friendships on Twitter, the only one who had made what he described as good friends was Henry, primarily through his music podcast and associated Twitter account. For most people, Twitter was used for gathering of information or for very casual social contact rather than the development of close friendships; this is not surprising, considering the 140-character limitation on tweets. LinkedIn had similar results to Twitter: few new connections were made,

although professional relationships could be nurtured through the site. It was rare for participants to report significant social interaction through LinkedIn.

Objective 2 was met by both the questionnaire results and the interviews, which clearly demonstrated that the more individual-focused social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter are significantly less likely to encourage the development of new friendships than online communities which are more group-focused and are based around common interests. This echoes much of the literature discussed in Section 2.5, which suggests that “most SNSs primarily support pre-existing social relations” (boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 221). Sites which are focused on building a sense of community online, such as interest-based email lists or LiveJournal communities, are considerably more likely to foster new friendships.

8.3.3 Evaluating online and offline friendships

Interview participants were asked to define friendship and to discuss the expectations that they had of their friends. The defining characteristics of friendship were the same for online and offline friends although, as mentioned in Section 8.3.1 above, many of the interviewees were cautious about applying the label of ‘friend’ to someone whom they had not met in person at least once.

While the measures used by interviewees for evaluating friendships were the same whether they were primarily managed online or offline – items such as affection, trust, support, mutual self-disclosure, and common interests – some of the expectations were different. Members of a group friendship online, for example, would not be expected to provide emotional support other than by providing a forum in which to ‘vent’ or to seek distraction or amusement. Conversely, some interviewees reported preferring to contact online friends rather than everyday friends in order to share news or seek support, because the asynchronicity of online communication meant that they were not disturbing or “intruding on” their friends.

Several interviewees stated that they did not differentiate at all between friends who had initially been met online and those who had been met in person: Daisy, in particular, said that she did not remember how she had made most of her friends

because of the frequency with which she had met, and continued to meet, people online and integrated them into her everyday life.

The results of the face-to-face interviews allowed Objective 3 to be fully met: although they may be maintained differently and may never, or rarely, involve face-to-face contact, online friendships are evaluated and measured in the same ways as offline, everyday friendships.

8.3.4 Integrating online friendships into offline life

Since more than 70% of questionnaire respondents from the UK said that they had met at least one online friend in person, it was to be expected that some of them would answer 'Yes' to Question 11, which asked, "Have any of your online friends become a regular part of your 'real life' (met your family, regular visits, etc)?" In fact, just under half of the total UK respondents, and 67% of those who had met an online friend in person, answered 'Yes'. The most popular examples given in the questionnaire of the integration of online friendships into everyday life were: staying at the home of an online friend, or vice versa; having regular meetings; getting to know each other's families; having regular group meet-ups; and going on holiday together.

More detail about the integration of online friends into everyday, offline life was provided by the interviews. Due to the geographical distances which often exist between online friends, having regular meetings can mean only seeing each other in person once or twice a year or, in the case of those who live in different countries, every two or three years. Several interviewees reported adding their online friends to their extended family, or the development of a separate, independent friendship between their made-online friend and a family member or long-standing everyday friend. Although several UK-based questionnaire respondents mentioned living with online friends, the only interviewee who had had experience of this was Daisy, who had shared a house for three years with a couple she had met online and who she described as having become part of her family.

Objective 4 was met by this research. UK-based questionnaire respondents and interviewees who reported integrating online friends into offline social circles were a

significant minority of the total; although it is not something which happened with every online friendship, it was common enough among the research participants that it is almost certainly a frequent occurrence among the wider user population. With regard to the second element of this objective – *why* online friendships are integrated into offline life – the primary answer can be found in the discussions of the research objectives above: individuals make good friendships online, with people for whom they feel affection and trust, with whom they share interests and confidences, and from whom they receive support and advice. It is natural to wish to introduce such friends into wider social circles, particularly when there are commonalities in terms of interests, views or personalities, as discussed in Section 7.2.3.

8.4 Limitations of the Research

There were a number of limitations of this research project, some of which were to do with the research design and methodology chosen and were therefore discussed in Chapter Three. This section discusses additional limitations which may have implications on the external validity of the research.

8.4.1 Generalisability of samples

The initial sample of questionnaire respondents, collected as a result of convenience and snowball sampling, was not representative of the population from which it came. This is always a consideration when conducting Internet-based research: unless participants come from a finite online population there is no way to achieve true representativeness. However, this research does not attempt to generalise about all Internet users, but to use the rich and deep data which arose from the qualitative interviews to provide a picture of UK-based users' experiences and opinions of online friendship. The scale of this research is relatively small, with 258 questionnaire respondents from the UK, and 36 interviewees, but it is possible that the results which were obtained are broadly generalisable to similar users in the UK.

8.4.2 Participant misunderstandings

Some questionnaire respondents had misunderstood the intent of the research, and assumed that it focused on, or included, romantic relationships as well as friendships. One respondent who had been invited to interview was ultimately removed from the

list of prospective participants; it was clear from his emails when the interview date was being arranged that his experience of online interactions was limited to romantic relationships and contacts made on dating websites. After an email exchange in which the research was more clearly explained, it was agreed that his experiences would not be applicable to this study.

In some cases, it became clear during the interview that the questionnaire had not provided an accurate reflection of the participant's experiences. For example, Quenna had answered 'Yes' to the three main interview indicator questions, but it transpired that she was referring to her husband, whom she had met on an online dating site, and that she was a very light Internet user.

These misunderstandings may have been due to a problem with the questionnaire design; however, the words 'friend' and 'friendship' were used throughout the invitation, the research website and the questionnaire. In hindsight, including disclaimers throughout the questionnaire stating that romantic relationships were outside the scope of the research might have been useful in reducing the number of respondents whose only experiences of meeting someone online were of online dating.

Misunderstandings were not exclusively encountered in the questionnaire: one interview was made particularly difficult by the participant having assumed that the research was exclusively about Facebook. This was resolved after about fifteen minutes, but the start of the interview was challenging, as the participant read alternative meanings into the questions being asked.

8.4.3 Interviews

The limitations inherent in PhD research of time, money and geography meant that it was not possible to interview every willing questionnaire respondent, or even every willing UK-based respondent. As Bryman states, "all social research is a coming-together of the ideal and the feasible" (2012, p. 41). In terms of this research, this was particularly true of the interview stage; while it would have been *ideal* to interview everyone who was willing, it was only *feasible* to interview a fairly small percentage (23%) of those who were based in the UK.

Although an attempt was made to ensure that the interviewees represented a variety of experience and opinion with regard to online friendship, it transpired that some were not as relevant to the research as their questionnaire responses suggested (see Section 8.4.2 above). Furthermore, several respondents who were selected to be invited for interview either did not reply to the original invitation email or, having agreed to be interviewed, did not respond to subsequent emails. This means that some respondents who, from their questionnaire responses, seemed to have particularly relevant or interesting experiences to relate, could not be part of the second phase of research.

8.5 Contribution to Knowledge

This research sought to explore UK-based Internet users' experiences of creating and maintaining online friendships, and to discover whether these friendships are integrated into participants' everyday, offline social circles. The subjects of online interaction and friendship are well researched; nonetheless, this study contributes to that body of work in several ways.

Research into online friendship and use of social networking sites over the past twenty years has predominantly come from North America and, to a lesser extent, Australia and New Zealand; there has been significantly less research in this area concentrating on UK-based users. As this study has a UK focus, it therefore contributes to this under-studied area within the literature.

The majority of the two main sample groups used within this research – the self-selecting questionnaire respondents and the purposefully selected interviewees – were aged between 25 and 44, with most of the UK-based participants aged between 35 and 44. This is an age range which is under-represented in research into online friendships, a great deal of which uses college or university student populations as participants. Thus this study contributes to the smaller body of literature which focuses on the mid-aged user population often described as Generation X.

Amichai-Hamburger et al. stated that much of the extant literature into online interaction and friendship has been significantly limited by the use of quantitative questionnaires and by collecting data using exclusively online methods (2013, p. 33). Additionally, McEwan

and Zanolla reported that the majority of research into the migration of friendships from online to offline had been conducted under controlled experimental conditions (2013, p. 1565) and that this leads to a lack of ecological validity and possible bias within the results. This study contributes to the research base by providing a rich, qualitative exploration, albeit on a relatively small scale, of online interaction and friendship, and of the integration of online friendships into everyday, offline social networks.

Finally, this research goes some way towards disproving the arguments made by some authors (Cocking & Matthews, 2000; Fröding & Peterson, 2012) that deep and genuine friendships cannot be created online and, indeed, cannot flourish without regular and frequent face-to-face interaction. The experiences of some of the participants in this research suggests that such friendships can in fact occur and are just as important to the people involved as those which are created and maintained offline.

8.6 Suggestions for Further Research

There are a number of areas within this study which could be expanded upon in further research. These include:

- The Generation X user population: research into the online behaviour and social networking site use of people aged between 30 and 55, and how their use compares to younger age groups.
- Changes in online social networking behaviour: a longitudinal study, investigating the ways in which individuals' OSN use changes between the ages of, for example, 20 and 35.
- Gendered development of online friendship: comparing how and why online friendships are created and maintained, using a sample with an equal gender split.
- Digital dualism: an exploration of active Internet users' opinions regarding the interaction of and intersection between their online and offline social worlds. This might best suit a quantitative research design, which would allow for a broader scope.

- The depth of online friendship: qualitative exploration of the concept of Aristotle's 'perfect friendship' online.
- The concept of direct social capital: using established social capital and friendship measurement questionnaires to conduct a detailed study into the connection between friendship and direct, personal social capital.
- Online-to-offline friendships: further empirical qualitative research into the migration of online friendships into everyday, offline social circles.
- Real vs. not-real: the impact which terminology (i.e. face-to-face as 'real' and online as 'not-real') can have on research participants (connected to the digital dualism discussion).
- Life stages and friendships: whether there is a correlation between life events or stages of life and the making – and keeping – of friends.
- Penpals and virtual friendship: a comparison between historical studies of letter-writing and the use of email or other online means to communicate with old or new friends.

8.7 Concluding Remarks

It can sometimes appear, from reports within mainstream media regarding the use of the Internet and specifically sites such as Facebook and Twitter, that little has changed since the earliest days of research into online social networking, when it was suggested that spending a lot of time online can lead to a lack of offline sociability, and that having virtual friends is somehow dangerous, or pathetic; particularly so if the majority of an individual's social life occurs online. Though the anonymity afforded by computer-mediated communication may lead to bullying or deception or outright abuse, it can also be a positive thing: virtual social spaces allow individuals to show and to explore aspects of their personality which they cannot show in their everyday lives, for whatever reason. The truth is that shy and introverted and antisocial individuals have always existed, and while it may be the case for

some that Internet use, and particularly excessive Internet use, increases those problems, for many people it is simply a safe place to go where they can overcome their social anxieties.

Many of the topics which this thesis addresses are reported, whether in the mainstream media or in research publications, at their extremes: the Internet as a safe space or as a den of deviance; online interaction as an opportunity to meet and get to know new people or as an exercise in deceit and potential harm; and online friendship as a genuine and beneficial experience or as a false and destructive lie. In reality, the experience of the majority of social networking site users falls somewhere in the middle; most people have experienced, or have heard of, deceit or misrepresentation online but on the whole an online social life is, if not yet ordinary, then at least normal. Groups form, and within those groups sub-groups and cliques; casual acquaintanceships are formed and dissolve; friendships are created and either flourish or wither. Some members do not engage, while others monopolise discussions; a few people are popular, attracting attention and affection, while most are only noticed by those they are particularly close to. Online socialising exists on a spectrum, and while there are Internet users at each end of that scale, the majority are in the middle, balancing their online and offline lives to the best of their ability in order to reap the benefits which come from both.

Ultimately, it seems that there is little difference between our virtual and our physical social lives: they are by turn engrossing and disappointing, exciting and boring, exceptional and mundane. The friendships we make online, as with those we make offline, require commitment, communication and commonalities, and they reward us with acceptance, enjoyment and affection.

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Appendix A : Visual Model for Mixed-Methods Sequential Explanatory Design

PHASE	PROCEDURE	PRODUCT
Quantitative Data Collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web based questionnaire ($n = 433$) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quantitative data
Quantitative Data Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data screening • Frequencies • Univariate and multivariate analysis • SPSS quantitative analysis software, version 19 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Missing data, standardised data, consistent data • Descriptive statistics • Descriptive statistics, cross-tabulated data
Connecting Quantitative and Qualitative Phases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purposefully selecting participants, based on 'interview identifier' questions • Developing interview questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cases ($n = 36$) • Interview guide
QUALITATIVE Data Collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual in-person interviews with 36 participants • Documents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview data (audio files, interview transcripts, memos) • Information sheets, consent forms
QUALITATIVE Data Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coding and thematic analysis • Within-case and cross-case theme development • Cross-thematic analysis • QSR NVivo qualitative analysis software, version 10 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Codes and themes • Similar and different themes and categories
Integration of the Quantitative and Qualitative Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpretation and explanation of the quantitative and qualitative results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion • Conclusions • Future research

(Based on Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006, p. 16)

Appendix B : Online Questionnaire

From Friending to friendship...?

About This Survey

Thank you for your interest in this study.

This survey will be used as initial data for research into the ways that online socialising impacts people's offline, everyday lives. The research is part of the requirements for a PhD in Information Studies at Aberystwyth University.

Please read the information below carefully. If any of it is unclear, or you have any questions or concerns, please contact the researcher, Sarah Merry, at skm08@aber.ac.uk.

This research is being supervised by Dr Anoush Simon at the Department of Information Studies, Aberystwyth University. She can be contacted at anoush.simon@aber.ac.uk or on (01970) 622145.

You must be over 18 years of age to participate in this study.

The survey should take no more than 10 minutes of your time.

All of the information you provide will be treated confidentially and will be seen only by me. The information will be kept securely, and for only as long as necessary to a) analyse the research data and b) report on the research and its findings.

All surveys will be anonymous and any personal or identifying data removed. Any direct quotes included in the report will be used selectively and anonymously.

More detailed information about the research and your rights as a participant in it can be found at <http://online-friendship.com>.

If you select "I agree" below, I will assume that you have given your consent to take part in this study, and therefore that you:

- have read and understood the information above about the study;
- understand that you can contact me (via the email address above) if you have any questions or concerns about the survey or the research;
- understand that participation in this research is voluntary and that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without giving any reason and without any of your rights being affected;
- understand that your responses will be treated confidentially and in confidence by the researcher;
- understand that your responses will be anonymous; and
- allow me to use your direct quotes (that is, any statements you may write in the survey) in anonymised form in the study's report/write-up.

) Your consent:

☐ I AGREE to the above

☐ I DO NOT AGREE to the above

About You

1.) Are you:

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Trans*
- ☐

2.) Which age range are you in?

- ☐ 18-24
- ☐ 25-34
- ☐ 35-44
- ☐ 45-54
- ☐ 55-64
- ☐ 65 or over

3.) Country of residence:

About Your Use of the Internet

4.) How long have you had access to the Internet? Since:

Options: ☐ 2011 to ☐ 1995, and ☐ before 1995

5.) How many hours do you spend online in a week, on average?

(This does not include time when you are online but not active, for example when downloading.)

- ☐ 5 or less
- ☐ 6-10
- ☐ 11-20
- ☐ 21-30
- ☐ 31 or more

6.) Where did you see this survey invitation?

7.) Which online communities/social networks do you belong to?

- ☐ None
- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ Twitter
- ☐ Livejournal
- ☐ LinkedIn
- ☐ Flickr
- ☐ E-mail list (e.g. Yahoo! Groups, professional mailing list, etc)
- ☐ Other (please give details below)

) Please list any other online communities/social networks to which you belong:

About Your Online Socialising

8.) Have you ever become friends with someone whom you originally met online?

(i.e. someone whom you first met online, without knowing them in 'real life'. Someone in this category is described below as an "online friend".)

☐ Yes

☐ No

9.) Have you ever had a 'real life' meeting with an online friend (someone whom you originally met online)?

☐ Yes

☐ No

10.) If you answered 'Yes' to question 9: how many online friends have you met in person?

☐ One

☐ Two

☐ Three or more

11.) Have any of your online friends become a regular part of your 'real life' (met your family, regular visits, etc)?

☐ Yes

☐ No

12.) If you answered 'Yes' to question 11, please provide more information (as much as you are comfortable with).

Further Information

13.) Do you agree to your responses to this survey being quoted anonymously in my research?

☐ Yes

☐ No

14.) Would you be prepared to take part in a follow-up interview?

Where possible these would be face-to-face interviews, but if not then via telephone/Skype/instant messaging/email.

☐ Yes

☐ No

15.) If you answered 'Yes' to question 14, please provide your name, a contact email address, and a little more information about where you live (e.g. county, region or nearest large city)

Your name: _____

Email address: _____

Where you live: _____

Thank You!

Thank you very much for completing the survey. **Please feel free to share the link with others.**

If you have indicated your willingness to take part in a follow-up interview, I will contact you in a few weeks.

If you are interested in seeing the write-up of this research (which may not be available for a year or so) please contact me (details below), and I will let you know when it is available.

Once again, thank you for your participation, and if you have any feedback please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sarah Merry

skm08@aber.ac.uk
www.online-friendship.com

Appendix C : Screenshot of Survey Page

PREVIEW: Testing Custom Addon

Refresh View • Page 4

Save and continue survey later

From Friending to friendship...?

About Your Online Socialising

8. Have you ever become friends with someone whom you originally met online? *
(i.e. someone whom you first met online, without knowing them in 'real life'. Someone in this category is described below as an "online friend".)

☐ Yes

☐ No

9. Have you ever had a 'real life' meeting with an online friend (someone whom you originally met online)? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

10. If you answered 'Yes' to question 9: how many online friends have you met in person?

☐ One

☐ Two

☐ Three or more

11. Have any of your online friends become a regular part of your 'real life' (met your family, regular visits, etc)?

☐ Yes


☐ No

12. If you answered 'Yes' to question 11, please provide more information (as much as you are comfortable with).

Back

Next

60%

 Student research survey powered by:
surveygizmo

Appendix D : Interview Guide

A - made friends online, met in person

B - made friends online, met in person, become regular part of life

C - made friends online, not met in person

D - not made friends online

Related to Questionnaire

A, B, C	You said that you have made a friend online. Can you remember how the friendship came about?
D	You said that you have not made a friend online. Do you believe that it's possible to make a friend online? Why?
A, B	You said that you had met an online friend in person - how did the first F2F meeting come about? Was it successful?
A, B	Did meeting in person make a real difference to the friendship?
A, B	Have you ever had a negative experience of meeting an online friend in person?
B	You mentioned that this friend has become a regular part of your life. Can you tell me how that happened, and what it entails?
A, B	Have these friends met your family and other friends? How did that happen? Was it a deliberate decision? What is the 'fit' like – is he/she similar to other friends and/or family who you are close to?
A	You said that these online friends, who you have met in person, are not a part of your everyday life. Why?
C	Do you wish that you could meet in person or is it fine as it is? Is there any fear or worry attached to a F2F meeting?

Related to research objectives

A, B, C, D	What is a friend? What do you think it means to be or to have a friend? Do you think that there are any rules or expectations of friendship? What are they?
A, B, C	What is the difference between the friends you made online and those you made F2F, in everyday life? Are they similar types of people?
A, B, C	Do you view an online friendship differently to an offline one? Different expectations etc?
A, B, C	If you needed cheering up, would it be an online or offline friend who you would contact? (having financial difficulties, having relationship troubles?) Why this person in particular?
A, B, C, D	How do you tend to make new friends - common interests, via other friends?
A, B, C	Do you think that it's easier to make friends on some OSNs than on others?
A, B, C	Do you think it's easier to make friends online than in person?
A, B, C, D	Is it more difficult to make friends "in real life" nowadays?

General questions about friendship

A, B, C, D	Would you say that you have many friends?
A, B, C, D	Do you have a Best Friend? Why/why not? What makes them a Best Friend?
A, B, C, D	How often are you in touch with your closest friends? What sort of contact?
A, B, C, D	Do you tend to keep friends from different parts of your life, or do you tend to leave people behind as you move on through life?

Other questions

A, B, C, D	How do your friendships compare to your family relationships? Are your family also friends?
A, B, C, D	There are different categories of friends – best, close, casual, etc. Do you have different expectations of these different types of friends?
A, B, C, D	Do you consider your partner to be a friend, or in a different category?
A, B, C, D	Are certain friends kept in their own boxes? e.g. people from one area of interest (church, choir, etc) never moved to other area (dinner parties, exercise class).

Extra information (at end of interview) - Relationship status? Occupation?

Appendix E : Interview Transcript Format Guide

(xxxx - transcribed word or phrase)

xxxx--	double hyphen, no space before	Change of direction in speech. Point of interruption.
[xxxx]	square brackets	Anonymised names of a person or a place.
‘xxxx’	single quotation marks	Word or phrase said in a way that implies air quotes. Word or term used in a particular way e.g. with some emphasis or implied disagreement with concept.
“xxxx”	double quotation marks	Direct quote, reported speech.
xxxx	asterisks	Strongly emphasised word.
()	parentheses	Indicates action/sound made by speaker, e.g. (coughs) or (sighs).
...	ellipsis	Short pause (1-2 seconds).
(pause)		Pause by speaker (3-5 seconds).
(long pause)		Pause by speaker (5+ seconds).
(laughs)		Speaker is laughing.
(laughter)		Both interviewer and participant are laughing.
(overlapping)		Speaker overlaps the speech of previous speaker.
{xxxx}	curly brackets	Unclear word, guessed from context of conversation.
{unclear}		Word unclear - no obvious guess.
xxxx	pipe	Note of irrelevant chat, not transcribed.
Friend	capitalised	Refers to Friends on Facebook, LiveJournal etc - public articulation of an online relationship.

Appendix F : Initial Approach and Questionnaire Invitations

Initial approach to Weight Loss Resources Help Team

Dear Help Team,

I was wondering whether it would be okay for me to put up a request for research participants in the Off Topic forum? I'm doing a PhD about online communities and the friendships which are made (or not) within them, and I think that the WLR community might be a good example of people connecting online.

I'm looking for people to complete an online questionnaire which is quite short, about their online activity and whether they have ever made friends online. (All responses would be entirely confidential and the research has been approved by the university's ethics committee.)

If you have any questions or concerns you'd like to ask before saying yes or no, I'll be happy to answer them.

Cheers,

Sarah Merry

(Message posted on Weight Loss Resources' Off Topic forum)

Looking for research participants

Hello,

(This message has been approved by the Help Team.)

I'm a PhD student at Aberystwyth University, and I'm hoping that some WLR members would be willing to take part in an online questionnaire as part of my research. It is completely confidential, any personal data would be anonymised, and the results would only be used for scholarly purposes.

My research is about friendships which are (or aren't) made online and how online life affects our offline life – it's not about weight loss or dieting. The questionnaire is the first part of my data collection – it's quite short (shouldn't take more than 10 minutes to fill in). The second part of the research will be interviews, with participants chosen from the questionnaire responses.

The questionnaire asks whether you would be willing to be interviewed about your answers. There is no obligation to do this, but if you are willing then I ask for some personal information so that I can contact you. The interviews will probably take place in late summer or autumn.

If you are interested in taking part, the questionnaire is at <http://edu.surveymoz.com/s3/564050/wlr1>. Please feel free to share this link with others.

More information can be found at <http://online-friendship.com>. If you have any questions about the questionnaire or my research, please feel free to PM me or contact me at my uni email – skm08@aber.ac.uk.

Sarah Merry

(Message sent to West Wales Coast Cafe mailing list)

Looking for research participants

Hello all,

(This message has been approved by Carole.)

I'm doing a PhD in Information Studies at Aberystwyth University, and I'm hoping that some of you would be willing to help me with my research. This would involve filling in an online survey, which is quite short (15 questions) and shouldn't take more than 10 minutes to complete.

My PhD is about friendships which are (or aren't) made online and how online life affects our offline, everyday life. The questionnaire is the first part of my data collection. The second part of the research will be interviews, with participants chosen from the questionnaire responses.

The questionnaire asks whether you would be willing to be interviewed about your answers. There is no obligation to do this, but if you did agree to do so, I will probably be interviewing in the late summer or autumn.

More information can be found at <http://online-friendship.com>. If you have any questions about the questionnaire or my research, please don't hesitate to email me on this email or my uni email – skm08@aber.ac.uk.

If you are interested in taking part, the questionnaire is at <http://edu.surveymoz.com/s3/564050/ww1>. Please feel free to share this link with others.

Sarah Merry

Appendix G : Screenshot of Survey Front Page

PREVIEW: Testing Custom Addon Refresh View Page 1

From Friending to friendship...?

About This Survey

Thank you for your interest in this study.

This survey will be used as initial data for research into the ways that online socialising impacts people's offline, everyday lives. The research is part of the requirements for a PhD in Information Studies at Aberystwyth University.

Please read the information below carefully. If any of it is unclear, or you have any questions or concerns, please contact the researcher, Sarah Merry, at skm08@aber.ac.uk.

This research is being supervised by Dr Anoush Simon at the Department of Information Studies, Aberystwyth University. She can be contacted at anoush.simon@aber.ac.uk or on (01970) 622145.

You must be over 18 years of age to participate in this study.

The survey should take no more than 10 minutes of your time.

All of the information you provide will be treated confidentially and will be seen only by me. The information will be kept securely, and for only as long as necessary to a) analyse the research data and b) report on the research and its findings.

All surveys will be anonymous and any personal or identifying data removed. Any direct quotes included in the report will be used selectively and anonymously.

More detailed information about the research and your rights as a participant in it can be found at <http://online-friendship.com>.

If you select "I agree" below, I will assume that you have given your consent to take part in this study, and therefore that you:

- have read and understood the information above about the study;
- understand that you can contact me (via the email address above) if you have any questions or concerns about the survey or the research;
- understand that participation in this research is voluntary and that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without giving any reason and without any of your rights being affected;
- understand that your responses will be treated confidentially and in confidence by the researcher;
- understand that your responses will be anonymous; and
- allow me to use your direct quotes (that is, any statements you may write in the survey) in anonymised form in the study's report/write-up.

Your consent: *

☐ I AGREE to the above

☐ I DO NOT AGREE to the above

Next

0%

Student research survey powered by:
surveygizmo
Professional research tool with SPSS exports

Appendix H : Information Letter

My name is Sarah Merry and I am a PhD student at Aberystwyth University's Department of Information Studies (<http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/dis/research/researchstudents/>). I am conducting research on people's experiences of socialising online and whether that has an impact on their offline, everyday lives, and I would like to invite you to participate.

The purpose of the study is to investigate whether friendships can be created in an online environment and, if they are, how they affect people's 'real lives'.

Description of the research process

There are two parts to the research process. The first part is an online survey, which should take approximately 10 minutes of your time. The survey includes questions about how you use the Internet and whether you have made friendships online. It also asks for some demographic information (age, sex, geographical location) so that I can accurately describe the general traits of the people who take part in the survey. The survey also asks whether you would be willing to take part in a follow-up interview.

The second part of the research is an interview. Interview participants are selected from those who complete the survey and who agree to be interviewed. The interview will take place at a mutually agreed place and time, and should take up to an hour. With participants' permission, the interview will be recorded to allow accurate collection of information; this recording will be transcribed and will be heard only by me and by my supervisors. All participants will be given the opportunity to see and comment on the transcript of their interview.

Your Participation

Participation in the research is entirely voluntary. You can refuse to answer any of the questions asked, and if you wish to withdraw your participation you can do so at any time, for whatever reason you wish. If you do not wish to have your interview recorded, alternative arrangements can be made.

All personal information will be removed at the earliest stage of analysis and transcription. Any quotes from your survey or interview that are included in the research will be used anonymously, under a pseudonym.

Publication of Findings

The results of the research will be used for scholarly purposes only. The data gathered from the study will be written up in a doctoral thesis and may also be published in academic journals or presented at conferences. Your identity as a research participant will always be kept confidential.

Confidentiality and Data Security

All of the information you provide will be treated confidentially. I will be the only person who has access to both your personal information and your anonymised data, and they will be stored separately in order to maintain your anonymity.

All information will be kept securely, and for only as long as necessary to analyse the research data and to report on the research and its findings.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please contact me.

Sarah Merry

Email : skm08@aber.ac.uk

Telephone : 01970 622177

*Address : Room 215, Department of Information Studies, Aberystwyth University,
Llanbadarn Campus, Aberystwyth SY23 3AS*

Appendix I : Interviewee Consent Form

Interviewee Informed Consent Form

Research Subject: Online socialising and its impact on participants' everyday lives.

Name of Researcher: Sarah Merry.

Details of Research: This research is being done as part of a doctoral degree in Information Studies from Aberystwyth University. The purpose of the research is to investigate whether friendships can be created in an online environment and, if they are, how they affect people's 'real' lives.

Please tick the boxes below to indicate your consent to participation in this research.

- ☐ I have read and understood the information letter about this research project.
- ☐ I understand that the interview will take up to an hour and that it will be recorded in order to ensure the accurate reporting of my responses. The recording of the interview will be transcribed verbatim and I can request to view and comment on the transcript.
- ☐ I understand that I can withdraw from the research project at any time and that, if I choose to do so, the recording of the interview will be deleted and no record of the interview will be kept.
- ☐ I understand and agree that excerpts from the interview may be included in the thesis and/or publications and presentations to come from the research, but that such excerpts will not reveal my identity.
- ☐ I understand that all data will be stored in such a way that my confidentiality and anonymity as a participant in the research will be preserved.
- ☐ I have been given a copy of this consent form.

Participant's Name: _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Interviewer's Signature: _____

For further information about the research or your interview data, please contact:

Sarah Merry, Department of Information Studies, Aberystwyth University, Llanbadarn Campus, Aberystwyth SY23 3AS. Email: skm08@aber.ac.uk. Telephone: 01970 622177.


If you have concerns/questions about the research you would like to discuss with someone else at the University, please contact:

Dr Anoush Simon, Department of Information Studies, Aberystwyth University, Llanbadarn Campus, Aberystwyth SY23 3AS. Email: anoush.simon@aber.ac.uk. Telephone: 01970 622145.

Appendix J : Screenshot of Research Website – The Process

From Friending to friendship...?

Information about my PhD research project



[Home](#) [Latest News](#) [About Me](#) [The Research Process](#) [Your Participation](#)

The Research Process

The purpose of this research is to investigate whether friendships can be created in an online environment and, if they are, how they affect people's 'real lives'.

I'm looking for participants with all sorts of experience: it doesn't matter if you only use the internet occasionally or if you're a heavy web user with an active online social life, or whether you have made friends online or whether you don't believe such a thing is possible.

The research will be carried out in two parts. The first part is an online survey, which should take no more than ten minutes of your time. The survey includes questions about how you use the Internet and whether you have made friendships online. It also asks for some demographic information (age, sex, geographical location) so that I can accurately describe the general traits of the people who take part in the survey. The survey also asks whether you would be willing to take part in a follow-up interview.

The second part of the research will be the interview. Interview participants will be selected randomly from those who complete the survey and who agree to be interviewed. The interview will take place at a mutually agreed place and time, and should take up to an hour. With participants' permission, the interview will be recorded to allow accurate collection of information; this recording will be transcribed and will be heard only by me and my thesis supervisors. All participants will be given the opportunity to see and comment on the transcript of their interview.

[★ Like](#)

Association of Internet Researchers

- [AoIR](#)

Dept of Information Studies

- [DIS website](#)
- [DIS on Facebook](#)

Contact me

Email : skmo8@aber.ac.uk
Twitter : [@merry30](#)

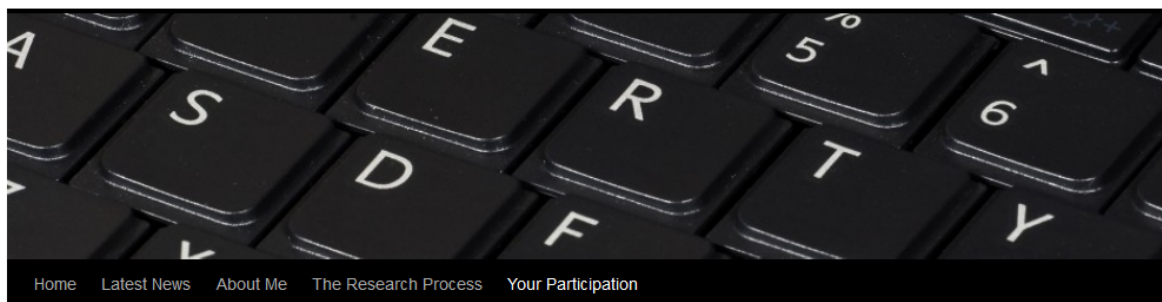
Latest Tweets

Error: Twitter did not respond.
Please wait a few minutes and refresh this page.

Appendix K : Screenshot of Research Website – Participation

From Friending to friendship...?

Information about my PhD research project



[Home](#) [Latest News](#) [About Me](#) [The Research Process](#) [Your Participation](#)

Your Participation

Participation in the research is entirely voluntary. If you wish to withdraw your participation you can do so at any time. If you take part in an interview, you can refuse to answer any of the questions without giving a reason, and if you do not wish to have your interview recorded, alternative arrangements can be made.

All personal information will be removed at the earliest stage of analysis and transcription. Any quotes from your survey or interview that are included in the research will be used anonymously, under a pseudonym.

Publication of Findings

The results of the research will be used for scholarly purposes only. The data gathered from the study will be written up in a doctoral thesis and may also be published in academic journals or presented at conferences. Your identity as a research participant will always be kept confidential.

Confidentiality and Data Security

All of the information you provide will be treated confidentially. I will be the only person who has access to both your personal information and your anonymised data, and they will be stored separately in order to maintain your anonymity.

All information will be kept securely, and for only as long as necessary to analyse the research data and to report on the research and its findings.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please contact me.

Association of Internet Researchers

▪ [AoIR](#)

Dept of Information Studies

▪ [DIS website](#)
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Appendix L : Snowballing Results

Where seen - SampleGroup Crosstabulation

Where seen		SampleGroup																			Total
		l4m	lj1	fl1	F2f	wlr1	ts1	dw1	F2f2	ww1	lj3	sc1	fb1	lis1	lj4	xs1	lj2	jml	flk1	js1	
LiveJournal	Count	0	45	0	0	0	15	20	0	0	17	0	0	0	6	0	5	0	0	0	
	% within Where seen	0.0%	41.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	13.9%	18.5%	0.0%	0.0%	15.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	5.6%	0.0%	4.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	
Twitter	% within SampleGroup	0.0%	95.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	48.4%	76.9%	0.0%	0.0%	94.4%	0.0%	0.0%	66.7%	0.0%	0.0%	83.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	
	Count	32	0	24	13	0	0	0	19	0	0	4	0	12	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	% within Where seen	30.8%	0.0%	23.1%	12.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	18.3%	0.0%	0.0%	3.8%	0.0%	11.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	
	% within SampleGroup	47.8%	0.0%	55.8%	31.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	90.5%	0.0%	0.0%	22.2%	0.0%	92.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	
Facebook	Count	18	0	5	6	1	0	0	0	4	1	13	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	51	
	% within Where seen	35.3%	0.0%	9.8%	11.8%	2.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	7.8%	2.0%	25.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3.9%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	
	% within SampleGroup	26.9%	0.0%	11.6%	14.6%	2.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	19.0%	5.6%	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	40.0%	0.0%	0.0%	11.8%	
	Count	0	0	0	0	40	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	40	
Weight Loss Resources	% within Where seen	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	
	% within SampleGroup	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	97.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	9.2%	
Mailing list	Count	0	0	1	19	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	23	
	% within Where seen	0.0%	0.0%	4.3%	82.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	13.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	
	% within SampleGroup	0.0%	0.0%	2.3%	46.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	16.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	5.3%	
	Count	5	0	8	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	21	
Friend or relative	% within Where seen	23.8%	0.0%	38.1%	4.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	4.8%	0.0%	9.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	4.8%	0.0%	4.8%	4.8%	100.0%	
	% within SampleGroup	7.5%	0.0%	18.6%	2.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	4.8%	0.0%	11.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	12.5%	0.0%	20.0%	33.3%	50.0%	
By email	Count	1	1	4	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	1	
	% within Where seen	5.0%	5.0%	20.0%	10.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	40.0%	0.0%	5.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	10.0%	0.0%	5.0%	
	% within SampleGroup	1.5%	2.1%	9.3%	4.9%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	44.4%	0.0%	7.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	40.0%	0.0%	50.0%	
	Count	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	16	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	16	
West Wales Coast Cafe list	% within Where seen	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	
	% within SampleGroup	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	76.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3.7%	
Archery Interchange	Count	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9	
	% within Where seen	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	
	% within SampleGroup	13.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.1%	
	Count	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	9	
Dreamwidth	% within Where seen	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	66.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	
	% within SampleGroup	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	23.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.1%	
LJ comm	Count	0	0	0	0	0	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	
	% within Where seen	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	
	% within SampleGroup	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	25.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.8%	
	Count	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	8	
Researcher	% within Where seen	0.0%	12.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	12.5%	0.0%	25.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	12.5%	0.0%	25.0%	0.0%	
	% within SampleGroup	0.0%	2.1%	2.3%	0.0%	0.0%	3.2%	0.0%	9.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	16.7%	0.0%	66.7%	1.8%	
Sentinel UK list	Count	0	0	0	0	0	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	
	% within Where seen	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	
	% within SampleGroup	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	22.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%	
	Count	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	0	0	0	7	
UK Cross Stitch list	% within Where seen	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	
	% within SampleGroup	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	87.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.5%	
Google+	Count	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	
	% within Where seen	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	
	% within SampleGroup	3.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%	
	Count	67	47	43	41	41	31	26	21	21	18	13	13	9	8	6	5	3	2	433	
Total	% within Where seen	15.5%	10.9%	9.9%	9.5%	9.5%	7.2%	6.0%	4.8%	4.8%	4.2%	3.0%	3.0%	2.1%	1.8%	1.4%	1.2%	0.7%	0.5%	100.0%	
	% within SampleGroup	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Appendix M : Excerpt from ‘Edwin’ Transcript

0:01:59	P No, some of the people I’ve met are on it. It’s mainly in the online gaming arena that I’ve been meeting people online. But I do-- You do meet-- you do pick up friends of friends, and that sort of thing.
0:02:12	I And you’re happy to Friend them?
0:02:16	P Not always. It’s not an instant decision, but--
0:02:18	I No, but if you’ve had some interaction with them on someone else’s Wall--
0:02:22	P It’s usually a recommendation of one of my immediate Friends, that says, “Oh, you should talk to this person,” - that kind of thing, really. It would normally be a recommendation from a friend.
0:02:38	I Okay. So you said in the survey that you consider that you’ve made a friend online, and that you have met that person in person. (pause) You said that you’ve met one person in person.
0:02:54	P Yes, I’ve met one person. Again, that’s through online gaming, but it was more through another friend that I met that person, rather than instigating it myself.
0:03:12	I Oh, okay. So they were an online friend, but the reason you met them in person was because of somebody else.
0:03:16	P Is through another person, yeah.
0:03:19	I Okay, fair enough. So was it a successful meeting?
0:03:21	P Yeah, I thought so.
0:03:22	I Do you carry on-- Are you still friends with them?
0:03:24	P Not actively, no.
0:03:28	I No, okay. So it wasn’t-- Because it wasn’t really your choice, it’s kind of-- It wasn’t your own development--
0:03:36	P I mean, to be honest with you, if-- I tend to consider my friends that I’ve met purely online as ‘purely online friends’. I wouldn’t normally go out of my way to actually say, “Hey - let’s meet up and go out for a few beers.”
0:03:51	I Is there any particular reason for that?
0:03:53	P I don’t know. I just consider them different groups, to be honest with you. But-- That and the fact that I don’t get to go out very much in the evening!
0:04:01	I (laughter) Fair enough! So are they-- You said they’re still friends, though. Are they more or less in the same place on the ‘friend spectrum’ as, say, friends you’ve made through work or hobbies or whatever?
0:04:17	P They’re certainly different. It’s very hard-- It’s not necessarily a scale of friendship, but whilst I’m happy to chatter with them online, advise, talk about things that I’m interested in, that sort of thing - I don’t think I’d ever really go out of my way to take the friendship further than that, to be honest with you. I consider them an online social group, rather than a group of friends that you’d invite round for dinner, or whatever. (laughs)
0:04:59	I Okay. But they are ‘friend’? They definitely fall under that category?

(**I** – Interviewer. **P** – Participant.)

Appendix N : Excerpt from ‘Kenton’ Transcript

0:24:07	I	I just want to talk quickly about the other social networks that you’re a member of. You said that you’re on Facebook. Is that just people that you know, that you’ve met in person?
0:24:19	P	Yes.
0:24:20	I	So you use that for very-- Is that personal?
0:24:22	P	<p>Yeah. I’m not a big poster on Facebook. I’ve-- There are few things I’ll post, very few things. But I’m on there to connect with people, so when I worked for [company], I met a lot of people in Canada, met a lot of people around the world. And I use it to keep in touch with them, so I can see what’s going on. A really good friend of mine, she had a baby two or three years ago, and it was really nice to be able to stay in touch. Now, when I had my first child, she bought us a present, so we bought her a present and sent it over, and it was just really, really nice.</p> <p>And then I’ve got another friend in America who was the American that-- He first recruited me to the company, and he was the one that, out of everybody there at the time, said “We want this guy”. I went to the interview and didn’t know a word he was saying, but he kept hassling me to join the company, and I’m glad I did. So I’ve kept in touch with him through Facebook, and-- Yeah, it’s been through Facebook, mainly. And he’s come back over with his family, he’s coming over next year with his family, and we’re going to get together.</p> <p>So that’s how I use Facebook. I use it to keep in touch with my sister and her family, down in Cornwall. I only see them two or three times a year, so-- That’s what it’s about for me.</p>
0:26:03	I	Maintenance of existing relationships?
0:26:06	P	Yeah. It’s not about going, “Oh, going down the pub to be interviewed about social networks today!” I’m not into what am I doing every five minutes. I’ve been tempted by Twitter, but then thought no, because I’m not going to keep it up. You know, I’ll-- I kind of hold social networking like *that* a little bit at arm’s length. I don’t know why. So open online--
0:26:32	I	Twitter’s very much more open, I think. I mean, unless you lock it down, and then it sort of defeats the purpose, I think, in some ways. But it’s a lot more open than Facebook is, I think. So I think it’s either-- It’s a love it or hate it thing.
0:26:48	P	The problem is, though, some people have opened up Facebook, and I know people now who are posting everything. So every day, this one guy who, again, he’s a really good friend from Holland, but I get-- every little strange poster or funny video is posted. And my Facebook is just full of it. You’re like - No. No. But it’s also good-- Again, people in Canada that I know, they’ll post photographs of “Last journey on the SeaBus before I go off on holiday”, and I remember that SeaBus journey. That’s what I want, not posting the latest fad.
0:27:39	I	Okay. You also said that you’re on LinkedIn.
0:27:43	P	Yes.
0:27:43	I	Is that professional? Are you involved in any of the forums that are on it? (shakes head) No? Just sort of like an online CV, really?
0:27:51	P	Yes, it is. It’s-- Again, it’s a bit of-- It’s one of those-- So I can keep-- Again, it’s keeping people at arm’s length. So I’m keeping business people at arm’s length from my Facebook. Unless I’m friends with them.

(**I** – Interviewer. **P** – Participant.)

Appendix O : *a priori* Codes (Interview Transcripts)

Benefits (of meeting)
Best friend
Definition of friendship
Different OSNs (make it easier to make friends?)
Difficult offline
Dreamwidth
Easier online
Email lists
Expectations of friendship
Facebook
First f2f meeting
Flickr
Frequency of contact (with closest)
Friends vs family
Google+
Holding on (to friendships)
How (was online friend) made
Keeping friends separate
LinkedIn
LiveJournal
Made friends online
Negative (experience)
No online friend (made)
Not met (online friend in person)
Not part of RL
Number of friends
Online friendship (comments about it, belief in it etc)
Online vs offline friends
Online-to-offline
Tumblr
Twitter
Types of people
WLR

Appendix P : Final Codes (Interview Transcripts)

Name	Sources	References
Behaviour	14	26
Caution	0	0
caution online	14	27
caution when meeting	3	3
General caution	1	1
Common interests	25	64
Importance of common ground	6	6
Work in common	7	9
Deceit	3	3
Online identity	2	2
Definition of friend	0	0
Able to argue	5	5
Ask for help	15	17
Being yourself	10	10
Caring	11	14
Comfort	3	3
Common interests	11	11
Communication	14	15
Connection	6	9
Equality	7	8
FULL Definition of friend	36	67
Fun	7	7
Genuine	5	6
Highs and lows	6	6
Homophily	6	6
Honesty	5	5
Infrequent contact	7	9
Interest	8	10
Loyalty	3	3
Not demanding	2	2
Shared experiences	8	12
Sharing	18	21
Spending time together	10	11
Support	22	31
Time	10	12
Trust	16	20
Development	0	0
Developing online	12	12
Development (general)	23	41
Meeting in person	11	16
Difference in OSNs	7	9

Different levels of expectation	16	19
F2F meeting	32	76
Desired	4	5
Disappointing	3	3
Enhanced	13	21
FOAF	2	3
Group meetings	9	16
Holiday	3	4
Meeting for purpose	5	7
Needed	6	9
No expectations	1	1
Positive	7	14
Stayed	6	6
Facebook	0	0
Facebook - general	36	86
FOAF interaction	3	3
Friending FOAFs	11	12
Friending strangers	26	40
Family	0	0
Family - general	20	24
Friends	18	23
Not friends	10	10
Partner	12	12
Filling a gap	3	6
Filters	0	0
Filtering	3	4
No filtering	6	8
Unofficial filtering	5	5
Frequency of contact	0	0
Offline offline	8	9
Offline online	8	9
Online offline	3	4
Online online	6	9
Friending strangers on LJ	3	3
Friendships	0	0
Friends - general	31	58
Friends as family	6	6
Loss	6	8
Gaming	8	22
Friending to play	4	6
Gaming for maintenance	4	9
New friends	1	1
Socialising as character	2	8

Holding on	32	51
How made	25	36
Impact of meeting	18	37
Different in person	7	7
Disappointment	4	4
Expanded relationship	9	14
Into friendship	5	7
No difference	6	9
Impact of SM	6	9
Important	7	18
Interesting comment	8	15
Keeping friends separate	0	0
Overlap	19	22
Separate	14	16
Levels of friendship	33	76
Deepened after meeting	5	6
Reservations re online	6	8
Limitations	5	7
Made friends online	26	47
Group friendships	2	3
Making friends	22	36
No more room	2	3
Offline	29	34
Online	11	14
Management of friendships	0	0
Casual maintenance	6	10
Everyday contact	11	17
Long distance friendships	13	29
Management of friendships (general)	25	52
Offline-to-online	8	15
Revived	3	4
Migration	9	10
No online friend	10	10
Not met	6	9
Not part of RL	9	10
Number of friends	31	36
Online friends	0	0
Best friend	3	7
Close friends	8	8
Fandom	5	11
Professional friends	6	9

Online friendship	22	47
Need to meet	14	16
Negative opinion	7	7
Penpals	2	2
Theoretically	11	14
Unnecessary	3	3
Online vs offline friends	18	38
No difference	5	6
Online-to-offline	14	30
Other people's opinions	2	4
Own space	2	6
Phone use	6	9
Potential dangers	2	2
Self-contained	5	5
Support online	0	0
Development	2	2
Financial support	2	2
General support	26	67
Giving support	5	6
Group support	1	1
Mutual support	6	6
Receiving support	4	5
Seeking support	6	6
Twitter	0	0
Active	3	9
Following known people	2	2
Non-active	6	6
Non-user	1	1
Positive	1	1
Professional	7	7
Twitter - general	17	30
Types of people	33	41
Like offline friends	12	12
Like participant	6	6
Unlike offline friends	9	9
Unlike participant	3	3
Weddings	2	4